

*The Wheel
~ of Love*

LILLIAN BARKER

THE WHEEL OF LOVE

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A Love Story

By

LILLIAN BARKER

Author of "The Spite Wife," etc.



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The Wheel of Love

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The Wheel Of Love

CHAPTER I

FATE'S CLUTCHING FINGERS

UP and down Fourteenth Street, above the din of New York traffic, in successful raucous competition with the roar of passing Sixth Avenue elevated trains, boomed the barker. "Your fortune for a nickel! Right this way ladies and gentlemen, your fortune for a nickel!" And in no time at all the man—short, stocky, black-eyed, swarthy—and his alert-looking parrot, had about them a crowd any circus ballyhoo artist might have been proud of.

On the fringe of the crowd stood a girl, conspicuous for her blue-eyed, copper-haired beauty, for her rather disdainful smile and for the shabbiness of the dark-green coat she was wearing. But even though disdainful, there she remained along with the other listeners as the barker, his jetty eyes shuttling to and fro between the mob in front of him and the parrot at his elbow, continued:

"Yes, for the price of five cents, half a dime, Polly will pick from this golden box here your own par-

ticular fortune, printed on a glittering card that matches the box in color. Now I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, can you afford to pass up this chance of a lifetime, for all you can tell, to learn about the future.

The mob response was instantaneous, and after an excited and contagious fumbling into pockets and pocketbooks, the "fortune-picking Polly" was kept busy for the next several minutes.

No golden card did she draw out, however, for the beauty in the shabby coat who just stood and watched the others as they read, compared and discussed their varying fortunes. That is, she watched them for a while—till the barker, training his eyes on her, said:

"For just half a dime, your fortune, lady, for just *half* a dime!"

At that a small black-gloved hand dug into a worn black-leather purse for a nickel. But none was there, only a dime, the one piece of money the pocketbook contained.

"Ten cents to my name," thought the girl whose curiosity was fast getting the better of her, "and yet——"

In another second the same black-gloved hand was reaching up for the pasteboard card that dangled from Polly's bill and for the five-cent piece the parrot's owner held out in change.

Seizing the "fortune," the pretty little yielder-to-temptation, read:

"Deep and dark are the secrets of the future, like the ocean's depths. And this is a fateful day for you. **THE WHEEL OF LOVE WILL TURN.** But you will also encounter peril. Yes, before nightfall you will find yourself face to face with both death and romance. **BEWARE!**"

Of all the absurd things! Why on earth had she, a supposedly intelligent person, invested her next to last nickel in a "fortune"? Just because everybody else in that mob had fallen for the ridiculous ballyhoo?

But, notwithstanding her self-chiding, looking again at the card that almost dazzled her in the brilliant light of a midday sun, the blue-eyed, copper-haired beauty reread the words:

". . . . This is a fateful day for you. **THE WHEEL OF LOVE WILL TURN.**"

The wheel of love! "Well," she said to herself, with a smile wistful instead of disdainful, "it certainly never has turned for me. Not in all my twenty-two years!"

Clutching the pasteboard square, she read on:

"But you will also encounter peril. Yes, before nightfall you will find yourself face to face with both death and romance. **BEWARE!**"

What a prophecy! But as if she were superstitious enough to believe in it! In utter disgust the girl in the pathetic garb—not only was her coat worn and frayed, her shoes were old and her stockings were cotton—tossed the “fortune” into the gutter.

The next moment, though, impelled by some power, all-dominating and wholly beyond comprehension, she stooped to pick it up. Scarce as money was, she’d spent a nickel for the golden card, and as a reminder of an April-day folly might’nt it sometimes give her a laugh? She’d always taken life, people and things a bit too seriously, anyhow, maybe. She who’d felt herself so immune to barkers’ ballyhoos, to fakes and fakers of all kinds!

Smiling in spite of her shabbiness and of her folly, the girl reached down for the shiny pasteboard square. But before she could get her hand upon it a gust of wind had snatched the card from beneath her fingers and swept it into the middle of the street.

She would recover it, however, before it was too late; before another April breeze blew the prophecy out of sight and out of reach, maybe, forever.

So, forgetful of everything except that bit of pasteboard with its glittering lure, the all but penniless beauty darted into the street—and straight into the path of a speeding limousine.

A shrieking of brakes; a jerky slowing of the car in a desperate effort to avert an accident which, in a

space so limited, no human power could possibly have avoided; and down in an unconscious heap went the pursuer of the parrot-picked "fortune."

Unconscious she remained, too, for ever so long, till, finally, she awoke to find herself in the back of a luxurious automobile, a man's bloodstained handkerchief tied about an aching wrist, a man's cream silk muffler wound around her head—and with two strong, masculine arms holding her close.

"Thank Heaven, you've come to, at last!" exclaimed the owner of the strong, masculine arms. "If you could only know how anxiously I've been sitting here waiting for you to open those pretty blue eyes!"

There was a deep-toned charm to that voice and a comforting sympathy in it!

"Where am I? What has happened?"

"Why," with a gentle tightening of the strong-armed support, "you are here in my car with me. Don't you see you are? And we're now on our way to the Sixteenth Street Hospital!"

"To the hospital? Then I'm hurt—seriously?"

"I certainly hope not. But my automobile struck you. You darted in front of it, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Well, you did, and the right front wheel knocked you down."

"Oh! And it was you who picked me up and bandaged my wrist and my head?"

"Right! But, of course, I'm no doctor, so my attempts at first aid were crude, naturally. And for bandages I had only a handkerchief and a scarf. Poor substitutes for the real thing, weren't they?"

"They're serving their purpose," with a touchingly courageous smile, "and you were wonderful to do all this for me. I appreciate it, too, more than I can tell you. I'm just sorry to have given you so awfully much trouble."

"Trouble! Don't even *think* that word. It's been a privilege to do what I could for you. I'm only grieved that my car mowed you down. "But"—as the limousine eased up to the curb in front of a large building—"here's the hospital!"

The door of the automobile swung open and the chauffeur, poking his head inside, asked: "Shall I order a stretcher sent out for the young lady, sir?"

"No, no, Bates." And then: "I'll just carry her into the hospital myself. She isn't heavy."

Bates stood aside, and his employer stepped to the pavement with his burden, though he would have been the last person in the world to call it a burden.

Walking along, down the long hospital ramp that led to the emergency room, the unknown gallant whose eyes were brown and very perturbed-looking, said:

"You poor child, it's a shame you have to suffer

so. When I think of your injuries and your pains I can't help feeling guilty——"

"But you mustn't. It was all my fault, not yours, that I'm hurt. I had no business running into the street without looking."

"Why *did* you do it? I wondered."

The girl looked up at her questioner, her heart leaping with gratitude for all he had done. What a kind person this dark-eyed stranger was, and how good-looking! Never had she met a man who appealed to her so.

His eyes were riveted on her, too, with a sort of unwavering inquisitiveness. Of course, he was waiting for her to answer his question. Still, recalling the chase for the gold-colored card and realizing how embarrassingly silly the explanation would sound, how *could* she answer it?

So to change the subject: "I'm lucky to be alive, don't you think? I might've been killed, mightn't I?"

"You most probably would've been if my chauffeur hadn't jammed down the brakes and stopped the car as quickly as he did," said the stranger who no longer seemed like a stranger. "Yes, I shudder to think of what might've happened if Bates hadn't spied you in time. We're almost at the emergency room, though—I see the sign just ahead—and before I take you in there I want you to promise me that

you'll be a brave little soldier. You know, while the examination's going on."

"I'll be as brave as I can," in a frightened whisper.

But just suppose, though she had survived the accident, that the doctor would now find injuries that would in the end prove fatal! To have to bear up under such a shock all alone! With the gallant so close she'd felt the support of his sympathy—and his nearness! How lost, and helpless, and scared she'd be after he was gone! Yet, had he not put himself out too much already? After all, what was she to him?

"Before you go," still in a whisper, and with unconscious wincings of pain, "I want to thank you again for all you've done for me. I want also to apologize for having run in front of your car. You must think me a terrible nuisance."

"I think—well, you'd be surprised, I'm sure, if I told you exactly what I *do* think."

She waited breathlessly for him to go on, but the next thing she heard was the voice of Doctor Fuller, senior interne on "inside emergency duty" who, advancing down the ramp, rushed up with the query:

"Accident case, is it?"

"Yes," replied the man in whose arms she'd felt so strengthened, so heartened, so secure, "this young lady was hurt in an automobile accident on Fourteenth Street. My car knocked her down."

"*Your* car?" Jerking back the door which he obligingly held open, the interne continued: "Just bring her in here and lay her on the table. Miss Spence, the nurse, will come in a moment with sterilized gauze and instruments." And as his order was being carried out the doctor asked: "Who put on the bandages, young fellow? You, I'll bet."

"You guessed right. A bungling job, too, isn't it?"

"No. It isn't half bad for an amateur. I've seen worse in my time. Lots worse, really."

The door opened once more and Miss Spence, rubber-heeled and efficient-looking in immaculate white uniform, entered with the surgical tray. "Don't you want me to remove the patient's coat, doctor? I'm afraid it will be in the way."

"Surely, take it off by all means. Also that scarf on her head."

And to the rescuer who stood apprehensively hovering over the table: "What do you want to do—hang around the hospital till we get through? Or if you're in a hurry, why don't you just call up later? I'll see that you get my report correctly."

"Thank you, but I'd rather wait. Much rather."

"All right, go down to the reception room on this floor. You'll find it at the end of the first corridor you come to, the one on the left. I'll send an orderly for you when the examination's completed."

"You're more than kind, doctor."

"Not at all. Just human."

The door opened again; closed. The examination began. The wincing increased. But at least there was solace in the knowledge that some one was waiting in the reception room for the interne's report. Especially the "some one" who *was* waiting.

"A probe, Miss Spence, please. I want to see about the cut on the back of the patient's head." And to the patient shortly afterward: "I hope I'm not hurting too much. But I'll soon be through and, for your encouragement, I'm not finding anything alarming. You are being brave, too, I'll have to hand it to you."

As if she'd be cowardly after that promise to her rescuer to be as brave as she could! Not for a moment would she have *him* get the impression she wasn't the brave little soldier he had asked her to be.

It was gratifying, however, the doctor's assurance that he was finding nothing to be alarmed about. So she would live! Live—and learn just what the man in the reception room *did* really think about her!

CHAPTER II

MARCIA MEETS LOVE

DOCTOR FULLER bandaged the injured arm which he'd just incased in a splint. "You'll soon be O. K.," he said, "but"—with a glance at the shabby green coat which the nurse had hung across the back of a chair—"if I were you and could manage it, I'd stay in the hospital at least a week. It'll take you that long, you see, to get over the terrific shock you've had. Besides, you should be here to have your wounds dressed."

"A week! That would cost——"

"Oh, about twenty-five dollars. But in any case you mustn't think of leaving under four or five days, and not then unless you have somebody at home to take care of you. Have you any one?"

"No, I haven't."

"Poor kid! The breaks are all against you, aren't they? Well, one thing's sure, we'll have to work out some way to keep you here for a while, anyhow."

And to the nurse: "While I'm fastening this bandage, will you phone for an orderly, Miss Spence? First, he can take the patient upstairs to the room

the superintendent has assigned to her. Then I want him to beat it to the reception room to tell that young fellow there that my report on the case is ready."

"Certainly, doctor."

Shortly afterward, the patient, in a white cotton hospital gown, put on by the emergency nurse who'd accompanied her upstairs, was lying on a white iron hospital bed in Room No. 66.

"Your name?" asked Miss Spence, taking the cap off her fountain pen.

"Marcia Reynolds."

"M-a-r-c-i-a R-e-y-n-o-l-d-s," the nurse repeated slowly as she printed the name, nurse fashion, on a hospital questionnaire.

"And your address?"

"My address?" with cheeks flushing pink, then a deep, deep red.

"Yes, I must have it for the hospital record."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that! Well, my address is—is, temporarily, the Club-For-Girls-Out-of-Work."

"On West Twenty-third Street?"

A confirming nod, and the nurse continued:

"Your age?"

"Twenty-two."

"Your nearest of kin in New York?"

"I have no kin in New York, near or remote."

"No kin in New York," echoed Miss Spence as

she filled in that blank, recapped her pen and rose to go.

Alone for the first time since she'd reached the hospital, Marcia gazed up through her sixth floor window at fleecy clouds—immense banks of them—floating across a cobalt blue sky. She was looking at the clouds, but she was thinking of the dark-eyed stranger. By now he must be listening to the interne's report on her case, and soon he'd be on his way upstairs to her. The joy, the thrill of seeing him again!

Her mind jumped back to the moment when she first beheld him, on her return to consciousness in his car—and still farther back to the chase for the gilded card, the pursuit which had resulted in their meeting.

What was it the card had said, though?

Deep and dark are the secrets of the future, like the ocean's depths. And this is a fatal day for you. THE WHEEL OF LOVE WILL TURN. But you will also encounter peril. Yes, before nightfall you will find yourself face to face with both death and romance. BEWARE!

Astonished that she had remembered, word for word, a prediction that had seemed so absurd, she realized with a start that part of the prophecy, at

least, had come true. For had she not already encountered peril? Had she not already come face to face with death? And mightn't it be that before nightfall the wheel of love really would turn and that she would find herself face to face with romance?

What was keeping the man who had taken her in his car to the hospital and in his arms down the long ramp to the emergency room? Had he, after hearing from the interne that her injuries were in no way alarming, left without coming up to tell her good-by?

Probably. And why should she have expected to see him again? What had come over her to-day, anyhow? First, letting herself be tricked by the fortune-selling barker into buying one of his cards, then throwing the card into the street only to go dashing after it a second later? And now, after being knocked down and injured by the car of a grand-looking, kind-hearted gallant, here she was all bandaged up and in a hospital bed allowing her imagination to run away with her.

What a morning and what a desolate feeling to be alone in a hospital! Alone and suffering!

Head throbs, wrist throbs, agitating thoughts and questions of various kinds all combined to make life utterly miserable for Marcia. Now those hospital bills! Where would she get the money to meet them? Of course, the doctor had intimated that some concessions might be made for her. Still——

A knock and in came a man of striking appearance, tall, broad-shouldered, brown-eyed—the gallant himself.

“Gee!” he said, leaning over the bed. “I’m relieved! I was so afraid, so worried till I got the interne’s report. You should’ve seen me pacing up and down the reception room while all that examining was going on!

“You *did* pace, really?”

“I’ll say I did! You never can tell about accidents. So many, many things can result from them. I was terribly apprehensive. Never worried so much in all my life in such a short space of time. I’m certainly happy now, though, only,” frowning sympathetically and gratefully, “I hate to think of your being in pain.”

“Pain! Oh, that isn’t the worst thing in the world!” Marcia’s smile was joyous. “And strangely enough, I’d forgotten about it all at once. Since you breezed in. Before that both my head and my arm were acting up. But—but,” pointing to a chair near the dresser, “if you have nothing better to do, why don’t you bring over that chair and sit down and talk to me a while? A few minutes ago, all by myself in this room, I began to feel just desperately lonely. Necessary as they are, there’s something depressing about hospitals, isn’t there?”

Moving the chair with jugglerlike swiftness, the

visitor sat down and said: "I've never been in a hospital. At least, not as a patient. I'm sure what you say is true, though."

"But," he went on, the dark eyes on the bandaged arm, "you won't be alone much longer. I just finished talking to Miss Wallace. I was arranging to have a special nurse sent up to you. Now, as it happens, there's a graduate of this same hospital, Emma Dalton, who's coming off a post-operative case shortly. In fact, her patient is getting ready to go home, so she should be here most any minute."

Marcia, appreciative as she was of his interest, looked at him with frightened eyes. To have to be saddled with this extra expense! "I don't need a special nurse," she insisted. "I'm not sick enough to need one."

Her visitor, however, was not to be swerved. "Be that as it may," he replied with a grin, "you're going to have one just the same. You just told me you were lonely before I came in and—do I look like the sort of fellow—or the sort of brute, I should say—who'd go away and leave you in this hospital alone? Well, if I do, then looks are deceiving, that's all I can say. No, my dear, all arrangements are made and, triumphantly, "that's that, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," granted Marcia, whose smile was rather sadly pretty. "Lying here helpless with my

arm in a splint, what use even to try to oppose my will against yours?"

"No use at all. So you may as well give me your word right here and now that you'll let me manage things in my own way; that you'll let *me* do all the worrying; all the paying, too. It was my chariot that struck you," with laughing persistence, "and I hold myself responsible."

"It was I who ran out in front of your chariot, and that makes *me* responsible for—for what happened."

"That old argument again! Now, if shouldering the responsibility gives me pleasure, won't you be sweet and let me shoulder it? I'd do lots more than that for you. Which reminds me, before you went into the emergency room I said I felt sure you'd be surprised to know what I thought of you, didn't I?"

"You did," arching her brows expectantly, "and I'm awfully impatient to hear after—after all the inconvenience I've caused you."

"You've caused me no inconvenience whatever, and I think, indeed, I know you are the prettiest, sweetest, most courageous girl I've ever met. Yes, you've made a whale of a hit with me and you could—why, you could just have me eating out of your hand if only you'll let me have my way about the hospital expenses. It doesn't become pretty, sweet, courageous little girls to be stubborn."

Marcia fingered the crinkly stripes of the white counterpane till her visitor, without warning, engaged her hand otherwise. Then she said:

"After all your kindness I really don't want to appear either stubborn or ungrateful, so have your way."

"Good! I was sure you'd be reasonable. And now for belated introductions! I'm Nelson Trawick."

"The architect?"

"Yes," Nelson admitted in surprise. "I *am* an architect. How did you know that?"

"I read the papers, and only a few Sundays ago I noticed in the *Times*, the rotogravure section, a picture of that Madison Avenue skyscraper you designed. The one with the striking geometrical decorations in the lobby. When I saw that picture, however, I never dreamed you were as young as you are—or that you and I would meet so soon, if ever."

"I'm old enough," Nelson chuckled. "I'm twenty-six, and we didn't meet a minute too soon to suit me, either. My only regret is the circumstance of our meeting; the accident, I mean, naturally."

"Yet," said Marcia, glancing at the now expertly bandaged arm, "if there'd been no accident we might never have met."

"Possibly, though I doubt it, for while I was doing all that walking up and down in the reception room I had a feeling—it amounted to a conviction, really—

that we would have come together some time, somehow. Call it fate, destiny, whatever you choose, we just couldn't have gone through life without knowing each other."

Marcia was beaming, and curious. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Because of the way I felt when you first opened your eyes; because of the way I felt while carrying you in my arms down the ramp to the emergency room; and because of the way I feel toward you now.

"But here I go declaring myself in this fashion and you haven't yet even told me who you are, where you live, or the very first thing about yourself. So speak up! What is your name? Your address? Your telephone number? I must notify your relatives——"

Those same questions Miss Spence had asked! Marcia's face crimsoned. But Nelson Trawick must be answered. Still, with everything going along so—so romantically, how deplorable to find herself in this position. A position both embarrassing and difficult!

"I have no relatives. None in New York, anyway," she added quickly, thinking of her only living kin, a few distant cousins in Virginia.

"No? Well, you certainly must have a name. So what is it?"

"Marcia Reynolds," she said, her eyes on the foot of the bed and her thoughts on the reasons—those

secret, reasons—that were making her so hesitant with her responses.

“And your address?” Nelson was too interested to be evaded.

Recalling the charitable institution where she’d spent the previous night, Marcia, her lips trembling, replied slowly:

“The Club-For-Girls-Out-Of-Work.”

Nelson, observing the quivering lips, thought:

“Poor, proud little thing, she’s not only a working girl, she’s out of a job and laid up in the hospital besides! Could anything be more pitiable?”

He gazed at her, at her lustrous, coppery hair which, with an out-of-sight dressing taking the place of his first-aid head bandage, now curled about her face in the most becoming manner imaginable.

What a beautiful creature she was, even in that plain cotton hospital gown, without the enhancement of silks, frills, laces, adornments of any kind!

But it wasn’t beauty alone that had bewitched him, Nelson realized, captivating as that was. There was something else. Something so all-potent, so alluring, that under its impulse he amazed both himself and Marcia by kissing her first on the forehead and then on the lips.

“Forgive me,” he said not in the least contritely and just by way of explaining, “if I seem to have

taken unfair advantage. But"—smiling broadly—"I have the most perfect apology in the world. I'm afraid I am in love with you."

"Afraid?" It was Marcia's voice and not her lips that trembled now with the ecstasy of delighted surprise.

"Well, if you want the honest truth," Nelson confessed, "I'm sure that I love you. Just as sure as that we're here in this room together. I didn't want to give you too many shocks all in one morning, after that terrible experience—the accident."

"But this is another kind of shock," Marcia encouragingly reminded him, "and the best cure in the world, I sincerely believe, for the other."

"Maybe you're right at that. But tell me, dear, before we go any further just exactly how you feel toward me; if I ever could mean anything to you."

"Anything?" Marcia recalling her utter desolateness while alone in the room and her indescribable joy on seeing him again said: "No telling what you can and will mean to me in time if—if you just keep on being as wonderful as you are now or—or even half that wonderful."

"My darling!"

Another kiss, with Marcia actually exulting to herself over the accident that had brought them together. And Doctor Fuller had sympathetically re-

marked that all the breaks were against her. She'd silently agreed with him, too, and now this divine, glorious, almost unbelievable thing had happened.

She was in love with Nelson Trawick and he'd just told her he was in love with her.

Her fortune *was* coming true. To the letter.

CHAPTER III

A JEALOUS MOTHER

ABSORBED, enraptured, carried away as they were, both Nelson and Marcia completely forgot about the special nurse who was due to arrive any minute.

She came, though, very inopportunately and opened the door—right in the midst of the love tableau. But so gently did Emma Dalton turn the knob and so cat-like was her tread that neither heard a sound till she was almost directly behind Nelson's chair. Then, on his feet with a bound, he wheeled around and faced a rather portly middle-aged woman who fixed him with a recognizing stare.

"I—I hope I'm not intruding," she said, her gray eyes, small and scrutinizing, shifting from Nelson to Marcia, "but I am the special nurse Miss Wallace promised to send up."

Nelson, showing no sign of recognizing her, replied: "Oh, of course! You're Miss Dalton, aren't you?"

"Yes, but everybody here just calls me 'Dalton.' It's shorter, you see."

"More informal, too, isn't it?" put in Marcia who felt very embarrassingly certain that the nurse must have witnessed the love scene.

"Nurses, busy ones like me, anyway, have no time for formalities," volunteered Dalton with a self-satisfied smile as she proceeded to get busy by placing her thermometer under Marcia's tongue and by starting the pulse count.

Nelson, standing by, watching the nurse's every move, followed her to the window where she went to read the thermometer, "Any fever?" he whispered anxiously.

"Only two degrees," Dalton whispered back, shaking down the mercury, "and a temperature of a hundred and six tenths is nothing at all in a case of this kind. The girl's doing fine, I assure you. Yes, with proper care, sufficient rest and the right kind of nourishment, she will soon be perfectly all right; as well as she was before the accident. Which reminds me, it's time to go downstairs for her luncheon tray."

While Dalton was on her way to the diet kitchen, Nelson gleefully returned to his chair beside the bed and repeated to Marcia all she had just said.

"I knew that, anyhow," she said, with a boastful laugh, "but," teasingly, "of course a trained nurse's opinion carries heaps more weight with you than mine, doesn't it?"

"In this one particular only, my darling. In the one particu——"

A loud rattling of the doorknob caused Nelson to leave his last word unfinished. Again and on his feet and again whirling about, he found himself in the presence of a woman, neither noticeably young nor noticeably old, elegantly gowned in gray ensemble and befurred with a four-skinned sable neckpiece to which were attached three large orchids.

The newcomer, evidently excited, flounced toward Nelson and demanded:

"What on earth do you mean by keeping me waiting so long? You told me if I'd only go on to the pier in a taxi so you could bring this—this young woman to the hospital in your car you'd join me at once. And here you are still, Nelson, after more than half an hour! I couldn't imagine what was holding you up. That's why I came racing to the hospital to find out. The distress you *have* given me! I've been like somebody crazy."

Nelson, at first stunned into speechlessness, frowned unconsciously, then after a moment, said:

"I'm frightfully sorry, Mrs. Stovall, but when I told you I'd join you at the pier without delay I didn't foresee——" The right words, if there were any such, eluded him. Even so, he continued: "Well, the fact is, certain unexpected things detained me."

"Unexpected things?" the woman repeated in a

voice shrilling with displeasure. "What were they? You certainly knew the *Aquitania* would soon reach the Fourteenth Street pier. You also knew I was waiting. So why did you permit yourself to be detained? That is what I can't understand. You've always been so thoughtful and considerate."

Nelson, though cornered, was a model of politeness. Realizing all there was at stake, he taxed his poise to the utmost in an effort to conceal his discomfort. With more than a degree of success, too.

The real truth was that since entering the Sixteenth Street Hospital with Marcia Reynolds in his arms, he'd not only failed to remember his promise to Mrs. Harvey Stovall, he'd even forgotten her very existence. So an apology was most certainly in order.

"I beg your pardon," he began. "But you see, Mrs. Stovall, this little girl was all alone in a hospital room and I—I was staying with her till the arrival of the special nurse I'd engaged. And I'd lost all track of time. I do hope you will forgive me. If I had only thought, I could have sent Bates to the pier to explain. But I'm afraid that I just didn't think."

Mrs. Stovall's brightly rouged lips, the lower one of which was slightly thicker than the upper, set together in an angry and unbecoming line.

The idea of Nelson Trawick allowing himself to be held up by a little nobody who'd been so silly as to dart right in front of his car! The *very* idea!

At the same time, for Mrs. Stovall to create a scene—well, that would be risking too much. It might even start the long-laid Stovall plans tottering! No, Nelson must be catered to—yet.

So, incensed as she was, Mrs. Stovall, placing a gloved hand on his shoulder, said in a voice sweetly affectionate:

"Of course, I forgive you, my boy. In the circumstances, you've done the only right thing. But now don't you think we should be moving along? The boat will dock in twenty-five minutes. That's fortunate for us, isn't it? Where's your hat, though, dear? Let's get going?"

"My hat!" Nelson's glance searched the room, the dresser, the bedside table, the window sill, before he finally admitted that for the life of him he couldn't remember where he had put it.

Marcia, wholly in the dark, naturally, as to the ties, if any, existing between Nelson and Mrs. Stovall and the reasons for his accompanying her to the pier, and with only a reluctant willingness to speed him on, since he seemed impelled to go, exclaimed:

"I can tell you where you left your hat. In the emergency room! I saw you place it on a chair in there."

"So I did, didn't I?" recalled Nelson, gazing lingeringly and fascinatedly at the gorgeous coppery curls

and into the blue eyes which were all starry with love as they gazed back at him.

"I must leave you now, child," he went on, "I really must, but—but I'll drop by later this afternoon to see how you are. And in the meantime, remember you aren't to worry about a single thing, for you'll soon be all right. Both the doctor and the nurse have said so."

"I'll remember."

Nelson, waving a last good-by to Marcia from the door, took hold of Mrs. Stovall's arm and led her out into the hall. As they stepped into the elevator he said:

"Perhaps it will be better if you'll just go and get into the car—it's in front of the Sixteenth Street entrance—while I do a marathon to the emergency room for my hat. I don't want to make you run unnecessarily. You've probably already done more than enough running for one day, haven't you?"

"More than enough is right, my dear, and I'll be waiting for you outside, in your car."

But the be-sabed lady didn't make it to the limousine ahead of Nelson, after all, for scarcely was he out of sight on his jaunt down the long ramp leading to the emergency room, when she heard some one call her name.

Turning, she saw a nurse she knew quite well; one who had nursed her on more than one occasion; the

same Emma Dalton who was now taking care of Marcia.

In Dalton's hands was the lunch tray for which she'd gone downstairs. But even so encumbered, she rushed toward Mrs. Stovall, exclaiming:

"Why, what a surprise to see you here! Have you been visiting some sick relative or friend?"

"No, I came here looking for Nelson Trawick——"

"And I don't need to ask where you found him," broke in Dalton, "for I know it was in the room of *my* patient."

"What! Are you nursing *that* girl? Then you've heard all about the accident?"

Dalton answered both questions with a nod, and lowering her voice, said: "Mrs. Stovall, you should have witnessed the Romeo-and-Juliet love scene I walked in on when I reported for duty in Room 66! Talk about shocks, you could've knocked me over with a feather! I recognized Nelson Trawick, or thought I recognized him from a photograph I'd seen on your daughter's—on Miss Louise's—dresser. And to discover him here in a hospital room kissing another woman!"

Forgetting where she was, Mrs. Stovall almost shouted: "Oh, this is disgraceful—terrible!"

"Not so loud," cautioned the nurse. "Some one might hear."

"You're right. Nelson has just gone to the emer-

gency room for his hat and may come along any minute. I wouldn't have him see us for the world. But I must talk to you, Dalton. I absolutely must. Isn't there some place where we can hide for just a few minutes?"

The nurse looked up and down the corridor, then suggested the X-ray room only a few steps away. "It's lunch time," she said, "and nobody's in there. Yes, that's the very place for us."

Closeted in the room with Dalton, who set her tray down on a table, Mrs. Stovall began: "You know that Nelson and my daughter are engaged."

"Indeed, I do know. You told me so the last time I nursed you. Miss Louise even showed me her engagement ring."

"Oh, did she, the little darling? She's coming home to-day from England. On the *Aquitania*. That's why Nelson's affectionate carrying-on with this patient of yours is so amazing. Maybe, though, he just lost his head for the moment."

"Possibly, but the girl is strikingly beautiful."

"*Too* strikingly beautiful," Mrs. Stovall agreed. "But, Dalton, nobody ever called Louise homely and can't you just imagine the manners, the culture, the *finesse* the child must now have after spending a whole year in London getting polished off in the London manner?"

"I certainly can. She should fairly shine in New York society, too, as the wife of Nelson Trawick."

"And she will shine in society as his wife, Dalton, mark my word. I don't purpose to stand by and let a mere shabby nobody ensnare Nelson away from my daughter.

"But," adjusting the long sable fur which had slipped away from her shoulders, "you know the conclusion I've just reached in regard to this—this whatever-her-name-is upstairs?"

"Her name is Marcia Reynolds. I saw it on the hospital questionnaire."

"Marcia Reynolds, eh? Well, the more I think about that Romeo-and-Juliet love scene you walked in on, the more I'm convinced that this girl is out to vamp Nelson Trawick. Her scheme, Dalton, just as sure as we are alive, is to work the sympathy racket on him. Why, she may even have thrown herself in front of his car just to get him in her clutches. I wouldn't put it past her. He's a prominent architect, remember."

"And rich, too, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is—since he inherited that half-million-dollar fortune from a great-uncle out in Australia about a year ago. Before that, though, Nelson was so down and out financially, he couldn't have finished

college if my husband hadn't advanced him the necessary funds. But the really urgent thing I want to talk to you about, Dalton, is this:

"Even if Marcia Reynolds is a beauty; even if she is determined to entrap Nelson—and even if she should turn out to be a clever and tricky adventuress, you and I together can outwit her. She is in your hands. She is your patient. So I—I wish to engage you as my ally and you needn't worry about being properly compensated for your services."

Dalton, noted for her efficiency as a nurse and just as mercenary and unscrupulous as she was efficient, pricked up her ears. "What sort of services have you in mind, Mrs. Stovall?"

"Why, I want you to keep an eye on Nelson and this woman. Watch them both like a hawk. He told her he'd be back this afternoon to see her. The minute he leaves call me up and report any and all developments. Do I make myself plain?"

"Perfectly."

"Good!" And Mrs. Stovall moved hastily toward the door as she added: "I must get to the boat to meet Louise, so I haven't time to discuss terms with you now, Dalton, but when you phone you can name your own figure and anything within reason I'll meet."

The nurse, taking on the spying job without a moment's hesitation, picked up the lunch tray and

followed her former patient to the door. "You may count on me," she said, "to the limit."

"And you may count on me to pay you well," came the whispered assurance as the allies parted in front of the X-ray room.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST LOVE NOTE

NELSON was on the sidewalk, watch in hand, when Mrs. Stovall hurried toward him.

"Did you get lost?" he inquired, helping her into the limousine. "I was beginning to worry. Couldn't imagine what was keeping you."

Mrs. Stovall hesitated for a split second, then spoke: "I'll tell you what delayed me, Nelson. Walking down the hospital hall I felt all of a sudden, as if I were going to faint——"

"To faint! Why, you didn't seem ill when I left you."

"No, I wasn't. But you see, the odor of ether from somewhere—maybe from a near-by operating room—all but overcame me. So I just stopped and asked a passing nurse for a drink of water."

"How unfortunate! Do you feel better now?"

"Yes, I'm quite all right." And as the car cut around a corner of Seventh Avenue into Fourteenth Street: "You think we'll make it to the pier in time, do you? Louise would never get over it if we weren't there to meet her."

"We'll be there in time," Nelson assured her.

They were, too. With some few moments to spare, before Louise, in a coral-colored coat and matching béret, pranced down the gangplank, threw her arms about her mother's neck and exclaimed in an accent very decidedly and artificially English:

"You darling, darling old de-ah! And you," treating Nelson to the same kind of greeting, "if you only knew how homesick I've been for you even in jolly old London where—take it from me—there are plenty of handsome men! I never saw one who could begin to come up to you, though, Nelson, not the whole time I was in England."

Nelson, trying to cover his embarrassment with a laugh, said: "Aw, quit your kiddin', Louise!"

"And you," Louise tossed back, "quit laughing off my compliments and begin to take them seriously. You don't think I'd spoof you, do you? And if I want to rave over my future husband, I guess I have a right to, haven't I?"

Louise's future husband! Could he ever actually be that after the heart-thrilling, soul-stirring experience he'd just had in the hospital? But, having learned from that experience something he'd never known before—just what it meant to love a girl—how was it he'd never asked Louise to marry him? What had he been thinking about, anyway?

Two customs inspectors coming up to examine

Louise's trunks and other baggage and to question her in regard to certain of her "declarations," gave Nelson ample opportunity to stand off and reflect upon the past; upon events and circumstances which had preceded his marriage proposal.

First, during his sophomore year at college, there'd been the vanishing of the Trawick fortune almost over night, due to his father's ill-omened investment in an Arizona copper mine.

Then, on the heels of that catastrophe had come the starkest kind of tragedy. Both his parents had died within a week of each other.

Not long after that, just when it looked as if he'd have to abandon his university course and give up all hope of becoming an architect, his father's former business partner, Harvey Stovall, had pressed upon him the two-thousand-dollar loan which had enabled him to complete his education.

And, as if piling favor on favor, Louise's father and mother had honored him with a big surprise dinner on the evening of his graduation. It was at that dinner, too, that he'd laid eyes on their daughter for the very first time.

But, following the celebration, he'd seen her often, for invitations to the Stovall's pretentious Washington Square home had come thick and fast. And,

owing Harvey Stovall money, how could he in conscience have turned them down?

It was all those calls—gratitude calls they were, really—that had resulted in his becoming engaged.

Engaged without any ardent preliminaries whatever, that Nelson could remember! How strange it all seemed now, after his soul-awakening adventure with Marcia!

“Those bally old customs inspectors!” Louise’s voice, shot up to an angry pitch, put an abrupt end to her fiancé’s retrospecting.

“What’s wrong with the inspectors?” he asked.

“Everything; they were perfect nuisances—that’s what they were!” Louise, taking possession of Nelson’s arm, marched him toward the pier exit. “The silly questions they put to me! You should have heard them!”

“Since I didn’t hear them, suppose you tell me what they were,” with a forced, if politely interested smile.

“Why, one of the old crabs had the nerve to ask me how I expected him to make head or tail out of my declarations. He said I hadn’t followed the printed instructions to passengers, simple as they were; that I’d totaled up the cost of a lot of dresses instead of itemizing the price of each one. He was just plain insulting, Nelson.

“But I gave him a piece of my mind! I let him

know exactly what I thought of him and his busy-body kind. I always did loathe and despise having customs officers poking around in my baggage and demanding to know what this, that and the other thing cost."

Nelson helped Louise and her mother, who'd lagged a step or two behind, into his car, and with Bates maneuvering the limousine out of a traffic jam in front of the pier, he inquired:

"How did your set-to with the inspectors wind up?"

"By Gertie"—Louise gestured toward her mother—"forking over a hundred and twenty-five dollars more duty than I'd expected to pay. But that's nothing to get a headache about, is it, when my dad's already rich and getting richer, judging by the cable he sent me last week from Buenos Aires? He's down there, you know, putting across some huge brokerage deal. So why should I, his one and only child, worry about a little insignificant hundred and twenty-five dollars?"

Nelson had seen the time when one dollar looked anything but insignificant to him. However, he made no mention of that. He only thought: "What a difference between Louise Stovall and Marcia Reynolds! And what a situation I am in—engaged to marry one girl and madly, overwhelmingly in love with another!"

As the car slid along toward Washington Square, Louise, taking a cigarette out of a white gold case,

asked for a light. "I'm perishing for a smoke," she explained, "positively perishing for one."

"I am, too," chimed in her mother. "Let me try one of your English cigarettes, will you, darling?"

"Certainly, Gertie." It was always "Gertie"—never "Mother."

Nelson, having lighted the two cigarettes, put the lighter back into the vest pocket from which he'd taken it.

"Why, aren't *you* smoking?" Louise was disagreeably surprised. "Don't tell me you've gone and reformed, old de-ah; that you've cut out the smokes. That would be a shock I never *could* get over."

"Oh, no, I still do my share of smoking. Only right now I have no yen for a cigarette, somehow or other."

The only yen Nelson really had, of course, was to sit there, dream about and live over again in his mind those exquisite thrills to which Marcia had treated him there in the hospital.

Brave, charming, gorgeous Marcia who, lying on her little white iron bed, had entranced him even into forgetting his fiancée's home-coming!

On Louise's insistence—for, after all, she still had some rights and he at least owed it to her to be decent—Nelson remained at the Stovalls for luncheon. But afterward, when he made a move to go because

of "business appointments," she told him, commandingly, he shouldn't do any such thing.

"Why should I let you leave me?" Louise asked, with a petulant droop of the lips.

"Because of the appointments I just spoke of. They are important—and pressing."

"You have no business having *any* business at all on my first day back in New York. The very idea makes me furious!"

Louise's flare-up and manifest unreasonableness gave Nelson an insight into her character that he hadn't had before. Thinking of that, he unconsciously puckered his brow and the next thing he knew both her arms were tight around his neck, and she was delivering the challenge:

"Try to get away from me now, old top! Just you try to get away!"

But the timely appearance of Judson, the butler, at the door with the message that Louise was wanted on the phone, saved Nelson the necessity of accepting the challenge to try to get away.

Scurrying into the hall, and passing the butler, Louise asked: "Who's calling me, Judson, do you know?"

"The gentleman said he was a Mr. Elting, miss."

"Mr. Elting!"

All Louise's petulance was gone in a trice. Her pale-blue eyes lighted with joy. The nobby,

monocled globe-trotter she'd flirted and danced with in one of London's most fashionable Piccadilly hotels, the same charming Tom Elting she had run into again aboard the *Aquitania*, was waiting to talk to her! True, he'd promised to telephone soon, but here he was calling the very day of their landing!

The conquest she must've made! Yes, Tom, the old de-ah, had evidently fallen for her! How exciting!

Louise, smiling penitently, reentered the drawing-room after a long talk on the telephone with Tom Elting, flopped down on the sofa beside Nelson and began:

"I've been thinking over what I said just now. It was mean and selfish of me to insist on keeping you here, wasn't it? Forgive me, please? Trot along to your business engagements and see if I'm not sweet about it. I want to be a good sport, darling, and I also want you to know that I intend to be reasonable with you, always. Honestly I do, Nelse, believe me."

Louise *intended* to be reasonable! That would make it so much easier for him to have a heart-to-heart talk with her just as soon as possible. About their engagement; the unwisdom and injustice of continuing it when, through no fault of his, he had suddenly found himself head over heels in love with Marcia.

With the heart-to-heart talk uppermost in his mind, Nelson asked for a date that evening.

"Come, by all means," Louise replied. "I'll be tickled to death to see you. Is nine o'clock convenient?"

"Perfect, and I'll be here on the dot."

But he wasn't. For, on arriving at his offices—a thirty-second floor suite in a Fifth Avenue skyscraper—Nelson found a telegram summoning him to Washington, to a conference of realtors, at which some architectural plans of his were to be discussed and considered.

He grumbled under his breath about the inconvenience of that meeting, since it would necessitate his taking a late afternoon train. Still, hadn't he submitted those plans with high-running hopes, and now wasn't it up to him to be present at the conference?

But what a hectic day! The automobile accident with its romantic consequences—Louise's arrival—and now this urgent call to Washington!

Finishing his business at the office, Nelson, pushed for time, raced to his Lausanne Hotel apartment, threw a few things into a bag, then sat down to his desk and dashed off a note to Marcia. It read:

My beautiful, brave little soldier:

Much as it grieves me to say it, I can't see you

this afternoon, as I promised. I have just received a telegram which makes it imperative that I take the four o'clock train to Washington.

But I expect to come back to-morrow afternoon, late, on the Congressional Limited, and fifteen minutes after I roll into the Penn Station I'll be at the hospital with you.

Meantime, honey, here's something for you to think about. I love you, love you, love you. And just as soon as I can arrange a certain matter—one I'm sure I *can* arrange to the satisfaction of all concerned and about which I'll tell you later—let's make plans to spend the rest of our lives together. What do you say? Have your answer ready to-morrow evening, will you?

Till then, loveliness,

Yours for always,

NELSON.

Stopping in a florist's shop in the hotel lobby, he slipped the note into a box of American Beauty roses which he ordered sent to Marcia.

Then he called the Stovall telephone number, only to be informed that Louise was out. Her mother, however, was there and to her Nelson explained the reason for his hurried departure and asked her to tell Louise how it was he couldn't keep their evening appointment.

"I'll tell her," Gertrude Stovall promised, "and the best of luck to you, Nelse! I hope every one of your plans will be accepted."

"Thanks a lot for the good wishes," he said, "and back went the receiver on the phone hook."

CHAPTER V

WAS HIS LOVE A LIE?

IN his Pullman seat, gazing out of the window at advertising signs just beyond Manhattan Transfer, Nelson calculated that Marcia must, by this time, have received his box of flowers. "I hope," he said to himself, "that she likes American Beauties, and—and I wonder what she'll think of my note."

But Marcia received neither the flowers nor the note. Dalton, in her capacity of spy, saw to that. She intercepted both and in her off-duty time, between six and eight o'clock, rushed to the brick mansion on Washington Square, the florist's box tucked under her arm.

Ushered into the library by Judson, who told her that "Madam was at dinner," Dalton laid the flowers on a table, seated herself in a deep-cushioned chair, propped her feet on a tapestry footstool and waited. Not for long, though, because it was only a matter of a few moments before Mrs. Stovall, in flowing black lace, entered and exclaimed:

"You must have news for me! I had a feeling you'd come this evening. Nelson phoned this after-

noon that he was off for Washington. But, tell me, did he go by the hospital? And if so, was there a repetition of that—that Romeo-and-Juliet love scene you walked in on this morning?”

“No, no, Mrs. Stovall, nothing like that.” Dalton arose and handed her ally the box of roses. “Instead, your daughter’s fiancé sent these. Now that was bad enough, sending the flowers, but inside the box you’ll find something much worse—a note of really alarming significance. Nelson Trawick has certainly lost his head completely over this girl. She has him vamped good and proper!”

Adjusting her lorgnette, Gertrude Stovall first read, then studied, word by word, Nelson’s love note to Marcia.

“I agree with you, Dalton,” she said as she folded the letter and returned it to the envelope, “that Nelse has permitted this—this adventuress—make a perfect fool out of him. But he will come back to his senses before it’s too late. I haven’t the slightest notion of allowing this creature, however alluring she may be, to ensnare him. Permanently ensnare him, I mean, away from my child.”

Emma Dalton, ignoble member of one of the noblest professions, wondered about the size of the bribe she would receive for her espionage and coöperation.

“You’re quite right, Mrs. Stovall,” she agreed, “to

break up this affair before it's too late. If you ask me, it's already a desperate case, calling for very desperate measures."

"No doubt about that," said Mrs. Stovall, tapping with her lorgnette the flower box on which she'd just replaced the cover, "so here's my plan. Before six o'clock to-morrow evening—that's the time the Congressional Limited gets in, isn't it?—I shall depend on you to have your patient out of the hospital. Even if you have to spirit her away, understand—even if you have to dope her."

"Doping," demurred the nurse, "would be bad for me if any one ever found it out. It might mean my professional ruin, Mrs. Stovall. Why, I might never get another case, and wouldn't that be terrible?"

A swish of the black taffeta petticoat under the flowing lace and Mrs. Stovall was in front of her conspirator.

"When I engaged you to help me, Dalton," she said, "you assured me that I could count on you to the *limit*. I took you at your word—and I expect to hold you to do it, too, if we are to continue our agreement.

"Now," fingering her platinum-and-pearl lorgnette chain, "if the worst comes to the worst, if you're forced to put Marcia Reynolds to sleep with a hypodermic, nobody need be any the wiser. Provided you manage things cleverly, of course. And you just re-

mined me a moment ago that this was a desperate case calling for *very* desperate measures, didn't you?"

"I did. Yet——"

"We cannot be hindered and hampered by any 'Yets' that may possibly defeat my purpose. This morning I told you I would pay you well. So name your figure. After thinking things over, what would you call reasonable? Before you set your price, though, make up your mind as to whether or not you're prepared to carry out my instructions."

Dalton, prepared to do anything, or just about anything she thought she could get away with, and who'd only balked at the doping in order to whoop up the price, replied:

"Considering the new angles to the case and the risks I shall have to take, especially if a hypodermic must be resorted to, how does five thousand dollars strike you, Mrs. Stovall?"

A whistle of astonishment escaped Gertie Stovall's none too pretty lips.

"That's a lot of money," she whimpered, "for just a couple of days' work. 'Still'—noticing the nurse's bargain-driving look—"I won't quibble with you. I will pay it. Or, rather," glancing up at a painted portrait of Harvey Stovall hanging on the wall in front of her, "I will see to it that my husband pays you. He will be back from South America in the morning and if you get that—that vamping patient

of yours out of the hospital to-night, to-morrow you will have your five thousand. Here's my hand on it."

Emma Dalton took the bribing hand, clasped it a second and said: "I'll get Marcia Reynolds away from the Sixteenth Street Hospital before six o'clock to-morrow evening, Mrs. Stovall, even if I have to administer the narcotic which you suggested.

"That's the way to talk. So good night, Dalton, and keep me posted, won't you."

"I most certainly will." And Dalton left for a promenade in the park and up Fifth Avenue before returning to her unsuspecting little patient.

Marcia, all broken up over Nelson's failure to "drop by," as he'd promised, lay awake practically all night, fretting herself into a fever, which by morning, had so increased as to require the use of an ice cap.

Refilling the cap for the seventh or eighth time along about four in the afternoon, and handing the patient an iced orangeade, Dalton said: "Drink this, it will refresh you."

After just one slip Marcia handed the glass back to the nurse.

"I can't drink the orangeade," she said. "I simply can't drink it. "But"—moistening her parched lips—"I would like to ask you something if you don't mind. You remember that young man you found here yesterday when you first came? Well, he told me he'd

be back in the afternoon and I lay here waiting and waiting for him and he never did come. Don't you think that's strange? He looked so honest and honorable, didn't he?"

Dalton set the orangeade on the dresser and gazed down into Marcia's fever-bright eyes. Here was an opening she hadn't expected. Seizing it, she said:

"Any girl who judges a man just on looks is often in for some big disappointments."

"I wasn't judging this man solely by his looks, but also by what he said and by the marvelous way he treated me. I've never met any one so kind. Why, it just seemed as if he couldn't do enough for me. He engaged you to nurse me, you know, and besides that he insisted on paying all my other hospital bills. I didn't want to permit him to assume these obligations, but, because he *was* so wonderful, I finally put my pride in my pocket and let him have his way. After he failed to come back, though——"

"After he failed to come back," helped out Dalton, "you were sorry you'd put yourself under obligations to him?"

"Yes," with a sob, "but don't you—don't you think it's possible that Nelson Trawick may've phoned downstairs and left a message explaining that he couldn't come, and why? A message that wasn't delivered to me?"

The nurse looked away from Marcia, down at her

white nurse's shoes. So the girl had put her pride in her pocket! Then she *was* proud. That gave the schemer an idea.

"Listen to me, child," she began with feigned tenderness, "to be kind is sometimes to be cruel, and right now, for your own sake, I'm going to be very cruelly kind. I see that you are in love with Nelson Trawick, so the sooner you learn the truth about him, the sooner you'll be able to stop caring for him; the sooner you'll make yourself forget him, for I happen to know that he is engaged to be married."

"No—— Oh, no!"

Marcia sat bolt upright in bed, in spite of her fever and her bandaged arm which was throbbing violently.

"You're misinformed, Dalton, that's all. The man who brought me to this hospital, who said the things he said to me couldn't be engaged. He just couldn't be!"

"But he *is*, my dear," Dalton persisted. "I am absolutely certain. I've even seen the engagement ring he gave his fiancée, Louise Stovall, the girl he met at the pier yesterday after he left you. She came back from England on the *Aquitania*."

"In fact," Dalton went on, "he was on his way to the pier with her mother when his car struck you. But he sent Mrs. Stovall on alone in a taxi while bringing you here in his limousine——"

"And that was the Mrs. Stovall who came up here looking for him? The woman with whom he went?"

"Yes, that was Mrs. Harvey Stovall, an old patient of mine. I met her downstairs in the corridor. Her future son-in-law had gone to the emergency room to look for his hat, she said, so we just stopped and talked a minute. She told me how she happened to be in the hospital; that she'd come for young Trawick, and so on."

Marcia, convinced at last of the truth of all the nurse's statements, asked her when she'd seen the ring Nelson had given to Louise Stovall.

"About a year ago, just before she went to England."

"So there can be no doubt about the engagement? He really means to marry her?"

"Most assuredly."

"Then," chokingly, "how do you account for his attitude toward me, for yesterday when you came in, you must have seen——"

"Him kissing you," supplied Dalton. "But hasn't it occurred to you that Nelson Trawick's caresses and kindness—his offer to pay your hospital bills—were all prompted by sympathy? Here you lay, injured, injured by his automobile and without money to meet your expenses. Yes, much as I dislike to say it, to him you were undoubtedly just a pathetic hospital case."

"To my mind that accounts for both his affectionate demonstrations and his generosity. I know he adores Miss Louise. She told me so herself. Besides, if that weren't true, why would they be engaged?"

So to Nelson she had just been a pathetic hospital case! Marcia fell back on the pillow, exhausted and heartbroken.

What a silly, trusting little idiot she'd been and how she'd let her pride be dragged in the dust! But, fortunately, no bills had yet been paid—and none should ever be paid by Nelson Trawick! Not so long as there was a phone on her bedside table!

"Dalton," said Marcia, "I thank you for your 'kind cruelty.' It has hurt me more than anything in all my life before. But it has also enabled me to save my self-respect, for just suppose I had stayed on here at Nelson Trawick's expense! Just suppose I *had* accepted his charity! Why, I could never have looked myself in the face again; I would have been too ashamed, too mortified, too humbled for words.

"Now," picking up the telephone receiver, "while I phone to—to some one to send me some money, will you get my bill from the office and on your way back will you please find my clothes, wherever they are and bring them to me?"

So the patient was leaving of her own accord! That appeal to her pride had worked. There wouldn't have to be any questionable spiriting away, any dan-

gerous doping—dangerous from Dalton's point of view, anyway!

But where was the money for the bills coming from? Maybe by listening to the girl's phone conversation she could find out, and the more complete her report to her ally, the better pleased *she* would be!

Leaving a crack in the door, the nurse heard.

"Hello, Pat. Marcia talking. I'll have to make it snappy. I'm in the Sixteenth Street Hospital—Room 66. Hurt in an automobile accident. Not very seriously, though. I'm planning to leave here immediately, provided you'll rush fifty dollars to me."

A pause, and then, "No, no, no, you mustn't bring it. Somebody here might recognize you, and that would never do. Just shoot up the money and I'll phone you soon after I get to my apartment. Good-by, Pat, and a thousand thanks for your kindness. I knew you wouldn't fail me."

On her return with Marcia's bill and all her belongings, which had been wrapped in a paper parcel and placed in a hall locker, Dalton undid the package, and to her astonishment, there came tumbling out exquisite lingerie, all brand-new and of the finest georgette!

What did this mean? Underthings so obviously expensive—and outer things so touchingly shabby.

Some mystery here, certainly. Who—and what—was this patient, anyway?

Like Mrs. Stovall, the nurse had been convinced Marcia was a vamp, an adventuress out to entrap Nelson because of his wealth, most probably. But the way in which the news of his engagement had seemed to crush her, to tear the very heart out of her, created a doubt.

Surely, no matter what had been her motive to begin with, Marcia Reynolds must be in love with Nelson Trawick now. And that surprising display of pride! Was pride a quality usually possessed by an adventuress? Maybe not, yet this was no usual person, this mysterious beauty. No, she was more and more puzzling, more difficult to comprehend all the time.

Hustling Marcia into her clothes, Dalton observed a worn black purse protruding from a pocket of the rusty green coat she herself had flung across the foot of the bed. After the discovery of the lovely lingerie, what secrets mightn't the purse disclose?

The arrival of a messenger gave the nurse the opportunity she craved and while he was delivering to her patient an envelope containing fifty dollars, she sneaked the pocketbook out of the green coat and very deftly concealed it beneath the mattress.

And when Marcia, her bill settled and with four dollars change lying on the counterpane, fumbled into

first one, then the other of her coat pockets, Dalton—already knowing the answer, naturally, but pretending to be solicitous—asked:

“What are you looking for, dear?”

“My purse. I want to put this change into it, but my pocketbook’s gone, apparently.”

“What a pity! You poor, poor child! This has surely been a day of misfortune for you. As if being knocked down and injured by Nelson Trawick’s automobile wasn’t enough, your pocketbook is now missing. You must’ve lost it on Fourteenth Street at the time of the accident. I do hope there wasn’t much money in it. Was there?”

Marcia, remembering the lone nickel, said: “No, no, there wasn’t much money in it—just a small coin.”

Then she started another pocket exploration that brought forth a cream-colored silk muffler—Nelson’s first-aid bandage which Miss Spence, the emergency room nurse, had stuffed into it.

Sight of the muffler proved too much. Tears misted the lovely blue eyes and the scarf fluttered from trembling fingers to the bed, with nurse and patient both reaching for it at the same time.

But Marcia, nearer to the bed, even if her hands were trembling, got hold of the muffler first, put it back in her pocket and started, tottering, to the door.

Dalton, without a word, rushed forward and gave Marcia the support of her arms all the way down the

hall, down the elevator and on out into the street where they stood waiting for a taxi, Marcia's head spinning dizzily and her knees threatening to give way. Could she get home without fainting? Dared she even try now that she felt so all gone, so shaky?

Yes, she *would* go—come what might. Not even this frightening physical weakness should drive her back into that hospital where the happiest and the saddest moments of her life had been spent. What inexpressible joy and what unforgettable sorrow she'd experienced during her brief occupancy of that sixth-floor room of the big red building!

Presently, about a quarter of five, a cab came along, black and inconspicuous. The nurse, who had been saying nothing and thinking much, hailed it, helped her departing patient inside and with a sigh of relief whirled around, not even seeing a bright yellow taxi which had rolled up behind the black one.

But the occupant of the yellow cab, Nelson Trawick, back from Washington an hour ahead of his first calculation, had glimpsed Dalton putting Marcia into the car just ahead. Why in the world—and he asked himself the question out loud—was Marcia racing away when he'd written her he would see her at the hospital?

Shocked and chagrined, but bent on overtaking Marcia, Nelson ordered his driver to follow the black

taxi which had gotten off to a start in the direction of Sixth Avenue. Barely was the order given, however, before a clanging ambulance backed up to the hospital and cut off the pursuit!

Distraught, but not to be outdone, the impulsive and much-in-love young architect started a chase on foot. How could he rest till he'd heard from Marcia's own lips why she'd left so suddenly? Something most extraordinary must have happened to make her flee, especially after the understanding they'd reached there in the hospital.

But *had* he really understood her? Could it be that she'd only flirted with him, strung him along? Surely, though, she wasn't a heartless coquette who would trifle like that with a man's affections.

But the black cab that was carrying her farther and farther away from him, where was it? With cars as numerous on the avenue as they'd been few and far between on Sixteenth Street, was this one lost all of a sudden in that endless procession speeding northward?

Quickening his pace, already that of a running athlete, and straining his eyes to respot the taxi, Nelson covered block after block. But to no purpose. For all he knew—and why hadn't he thought of it sooner?—Marcia's cab might no longer even be in that endless maze of automobiles. It might long ago

have cut down a cross street and even landed her at her destination.

The disappointed and thwarted lover stood on a Sixth Avenue corner and tried in vain to reconcile himself to the puzzling and painful situation.

And the girl he loved, riding alone and approaching her destination, a flat in the Arlington Apartments on East Thirty-first Street, her head aching and her wrist throbbing, wept into the silk scarf as she remembered Dalton's words, "To him you were only a pathetic hospital case."

"A pathetic hospital case!" So pity, nothing else, had prompted Nelson Trawick's offer to pay her bills, and he'd made her believe he truly cared for her when he adored Louise Stovall and intended to marry her.

Well, at least she'd paid her own hospital bills. Before Nelson Trawick had had a chance to settle them, too. Now he would know, no matter how pathetic she looked, that she had some pride. Enough to make her spurn his help.

Her mind jumped back to the circumstances of their meeting. Why hadn't she allowed that gold-carded "fortune" to remain in the street where the wind had blown it? What a price to have to pay for one little superstitious indulgence!

What a price to pay!

CHAPTER VI

A DISCONSOLATE LOVER

NELSON, in his perplexity, taxied back to the hospital, hoping Dalton might be able to tell him where and why Marcia had gone. Surely she must have left some address for him and some explanation of her sudden flight. Strange that hadn't occurred to him before, but somehow his wits didn't seem to be working. Failure to catch up with her had disappointed and confused him so greatly.

In the recently vacated room he found the nurse leaning over the bed on which were strewn several articles: Marcia's pocketbook and the things it had contained. But to these objects Nelson paid no attention; his mind was too centered on the questions he intended to ask.

Before he could give them utterance, however, Dalton, confused and bewildered at sight of him, exclaimed:

"Why, you—you're——" Remembering the intercepted note, she almost said: "You're back sooner than you expected to be!" But a glance at the articles on the bed sealed her lips just in the nick of time.

With loverlike impatience Nelson made his inquiries, to which the nurse replied: "I'm sorry to have to tell you, Mr. Trawick, that I have no more idea than you where the girl has gone, or why she fled from the hospital."

"Do you mean to say she just left without a word of explanation? That certainly strikes me as peculiar—in her condition. The interne who dressed her injuries told me she should stay here a week."

"I know. But apparently, all at once, Marcia Reynolds just took it into her head to go. And," continued Dalton, "with that decision made, she called up a man named Pat and asked him to send her fifty dollars——"

"Pat who?" Nelson was scowling.

"I can't tell you his last name. My patient just called him Pat, and he must've offered to bring up the money himself, for I heard her tell him very emphatically not to do it because it would never do to have any one here recognize him."

"What do you suppose she meant by that?"

"Your guess would be quite as good as mine. But this is only *one* of the unexplained mysteries connected with this young woman. There are others. To continue, however, what I started to say, after this fellow Pat rushed the fifty dollars up here, the girl settled her bill and then hurried away. All very strange, isn't it?"

"Positively baffling to me. Baffling and painful. I can't begin to understand it."

Recalling that Marcia had told him she had no relatives in New York, Nelson tried to figure out who this Pat could be. A friend? Merely a friend? Or a sweetheart?

Surely not the latter, for hadn't she given Nelson every evidence of returning his affection? Hadn't she said in a voice of ringing sincerity that he *could* mean *everything* to her?

Still, to be just, hadn't he himself fallen for Marcia while engaged to Louise Stovall? And had he even so much as remembered their betrothal?

But, of course, he'd since resolved to ask Louise to release him. That was why he'd made the date for the heart-to-heart talk which the hurry-up call to Washington had prevented his keeping. It was also why he'd written the note to Marcia and put it inside the box of roses. Maybe the note and the flowers hadn't reached her, though.

With more than one ray of hope illuminating his anxious countenance, he asked if Marcia had received the package.

Dalton hesitated for a moment—just long enough to remember signing for the box and to reason that Nelson, if he wanted to take the trouble, could check her signature on the florist's delivery book—then said:

"Oh, yes, she got both the flowers and the letter."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely. I gave them to her, and she asked me to take the roses out of the room. She said she'd always detested red roses."

And the nurse, impervious to the distress she saw mirrored in his eyes, went on: "It just occurs to me now that the girl's eagerness to leave was no doubt due to impatience to keep an outside date with Pat, for I heard her tell him over the phone that she'd call him up as soon as she reached home."

"Oh, you hadn't told me that before and it does throw a new light on her running away, doesn't it?" Nelson nervously cleared his throat. It was a crushing disappointment to come back to New York and hear these startling revelations!

Hurt and grieved beyond expression, he gazed about the room—this spot where he'd passed the most ecstatic moments of his whole life. And now the gorgeous creature to whom he owed those incomparable thrills was gone. Gone from the hospital and out of his life, unless, somehow, he might be able to find her!

Finally, Marcia's worn black-leather purse on the bed caught his roving eye. He picked it up and exclaimed:

"She left this, I see! I know it's hers because I picked it up and slipped it into her coat pocket right after the accident."

Then Nelson Trawick put the purse into the seedy old green coat from which she, Emma Dalton, had sneaked it out on a hunch!

"Yes," said Dalton, in her smooth-tongued manner, "the girl in her mad haste must've forgotten the purse, because a moment ago when I started to change the bed linen I found it under the pillow. And searching inside for an address, for I wanted to return the pocketbook to its owner, I discovered the articles you see here on the counterpane."

Nelson regarded the articles, one by one, as Dalton continued:

"I was examining this cigarette case when you came in and what do you suppose it's made of? Onyx, real onyx. Just look at it," handing him the case. "And see, the initials 'M. R.', are monogrammed into the onyx with diamonds. Isn't it stunning? And imagine the cost! That was why I could hardly believe my eyes when I shook such an expensive bauble from a nearly worn-out purse in which there was no money at all, except one single nickel."

Nelson, inspecting the case, agreed it was a costly gadget. And with it back on the bed, he picked up a dainty white linen handkerchief, marked with the same initials, "M. R.," and very subtly fragrant with a blended perfume that Dalton assured him was notoriously expensive.

"I recognize the scent," she volunteered, "because I

had a terribly rich patient once who always used it and who told me what she paid for it by the ounce."

"Is that so?" Nelson laid down the handkerchief and took up a visiting card on which his astonished eyes read the engraved name: "Medella Rolston."

"Medella Rolston!" he said in a lowered voice, but not too low for Dalton to hear.

"Another puzzling thing, that card, isn't it?" the nurse remarked. "The girl's name on the hospital records is Marcia Reynolds and the one on this visiting card is Medella Rolston. Different names with the same initials!"

"So they are," said Nelson, his eyes still riveted on the card.

"You will remember, Mr. Trawick, I told you my patient's running away wasn't the only unexplained mystery connected with her. Now when I said that, I had in mind this costly cigarette case, the handkerchief with the notoriously expensive perfume on it and this glaring contradiction in names. And that isn't all——"

"Well, what else is there?" Nelson replaced the card on the counterpane.

"On second thought, I guess I shouldn't mention it—unless you insist upon it. It's something of a very personal and intimate nature, you see."

She had in mind, of course, Marcia's lingerie, new

and so fine and in such striking contrast with her exterior shabbiness.

"But we have enough tangible evidence right here on the bed to prove that my departed patient is an impostor, a masquerader, haven't we?"

"Evidence often is misleading," defended Nelson, hurt and dismayed as he was, "and if I can only locate Marcia, I am confident she will be able to clear up all these seeming mysteries. And," hope again brightening his face, "I believe I *can* find her, too, Dalton, for I recall she gave me the Club-For-Girls-Out-of-Work—as a temporary address, anyway."

Snatching up all the scattered articles, he dropped them back into the purse. "That's where I'm going to head for now! I'm going to give this little girl her pocketbook and to hear from her the explanation of these things that would seem to stamp her as a masquerader."

"I hope you won't have all your pains for nothing." Dalton's usually ruddy cheeks blanched with fear at the thought that Nelson Trawick might locate the girl! Adventuress, impostor, masquerader, no matter what Marcia might be, a few denials from her and this smitten young man would realize that she, the special nurse he himself had engaged, was an out-and-out liar. It was a long chance Dalton had taken for that promised five thousand dollars!

Nelson, spurred on by his purpose and not even remarking the nurse's sudden pallor, was out of the room like lightning. And with a taxi speeding him there, he was very soon in the long, old-fashioned, gas-lighted hallway of the Club-For-Girls-Out-Of-Work, talking to Miss Patience Holley, the elderly, gray-haired, bespectacled matron.

"I'm looking for a young girl named Marcia Reynolds," he explained. "She gave me this as her temporary address."

"Marcia Reynolds?" Miss Holley couldn't recall any one by that name, though she had "an uncommonly good memory for names," she added with unobjectionable boastfulness. "But when did the young woman give you the club as her address? Of course, if it was a long time ago——"

"No, it was only yesterday she gave it to me."

"That's odd. I'm sure no person by that name has been here so recently as that. Still, if you wish, if you'd feel better satisfied, I'll look on our register." Miss Holley pointed to a large book lying on an oak table beside the stairway.

"I *would* feel better satisfied," said Nelson, "if you'd run through the names, or permit me to do so. I hope I'm not giving you too much trouble," watching the matron wipe her glasses inside and out with the corner of her white apron, "but finding Marcia Reynolds means everything to me."

"I know that without any saying. Your manner betrayed you." Opening the big book, with Nelson close at her side, Patricia Holley smiled up at him with a matronly sweetness, and said: "Come on, look with me. I don't want you to leave here with any doubt at all in your mind."

"You certainly are considerate."

But their joint search, which covered entries for many months back, proved fruitless.

"I'm awfully sorry," sympathized the matron. "I was positive, though, I'd never even heard that name."

Nelson, seized with another inspiration, snapped out of the black study into which failure to find Marcia's name had plunged him and exclaimed:

"Oh, Miss Holley, will you do me another great big favor? Will you let me go through the register again? I want to make a further search. Or maybe you remember a girl named Medella Rolston?"

"No, that name is just as unfamiliar to me as the other. But here's the book. Examine it all you want to. Anything to relieve your mind."

With his second search, however, Nelson had no better luck than with the first one, and expressing his gratitude to the kindly and hospitable matron he trudged down the stone steps of the club and on to his apartment.

It was a long, long trudge, too, but he wanted to walk—that is if a man as cut up and disconsolate as

he could really know *what* he wanted to do. Marcia had not only deceived him about loving him; she'd also given him a fake address. That beautiful, honest-eyed girl had been guilty of deliberate misrepresentation! If he could only figure out her motives!

When Nelson turned the key in the door of his apartment, he realized with a start, that he had left his suitcase in the cab from which he'd leaped in front of the Sixteenth Street Hospital. However, inasmuch as he'd kept copies of his building designs—those which had been discussed at the realtors' conference, and all but one of which had been accepted—loss of the baggage was a trivial matter.

Wouldn't any loss, though, compared with his loss of Marcia, have been trivial?

Switching on the lights, Nelson sank into a big overstuffed chair and began another scrutiny of the contents of Marcia's purse which he'd slipped into his pocket on the way to the Club-For-Girls-Out-Of-Work.

Her possessions! Her little intimate possessions, the perfumed handkerchief and the be-diamonded onyx cigarette case! Would he ever have the opportunity to return these things to the mysterious, exquisite creature who'd bewitched him into idolizing her—only to disappear and leave him disconsolate?

CHAPTER VII

THE GIRL REPORTER

SOME two weeks later Marcia Reynolds, recovered from her injuries and looking prosperously up to date in a snappy blue coat suit, saucy blue hat and cream satin blouse with frilly collar, burst into the city room of the New York *Courier* and stopped a regular bedlam of typewriters.

“ ‘Lo, Marcia! Hey, kid, how are you? All well again? What was the big idea of getting knocked down by an automobile? Why didn’t you look where you were going? Gee, but we’re tickled to have our beautiful girl reporter back on the job! Maybe we didn’t miss her!”

“And maybe I didn’t miss you fellows, too!” came Marcia’s answering greeting to reporters scattered all over the room. “Being laid up with a bum wrist is no fun, take it from me! I’d rather be out interviewing celebs and pounding the keys any old day. No kiddin’, boys, I mean it!”

“Who said you were kiddin’?” demanded Pat Sartwell, the *Courier’s* best-looking gatherer and writer of news. “Handsome Lothario” fellow re-

porters called Pat. He had left his own desk and followed Marcia to hers to ask that question. "I've spent enough time with you during the last couple of weeks, haven't I, pretty baby, to know all you've been through; to see how you've suffered."

"You certainly have been swell to me, Pat, getting in that trained nurse I had to have nearly a week, and looking after me generally. I'll never forget all you did for me."

"And I'll never forget the kick I got out of being with you, Marcia. I didn't know what a grand and glorious kid you were, see, till you finally let me go up to your house and get acquainted with you. Before that, much as I admired you here in the city room, and crazy as I was to date you, you always froze me out so that I just gave up trying to make you return my affection."

"There you go—there you go," chided Marcia, pulling open her typewriter desk. "No wonder everybody around here calls you Lothario. But I guess you just can't help being a flirt any more than you can help being handsome, can you? Even if you are a ladies' man, with a flair for pretty compliments, I don't hold it against you."

"What gave you the notion that I was such a ladies' man, honey?"

Marcia took off her pert hat, hung it on a wall

hook and began dusting her desk with a cloth she kept in the bottom drawer.

"What gave me the notion that you were a ladies' man? That's your office reputation, and you know it. Why, when I first came up here from Richmond and landed this job on the *Courier*, I heard about the crush you'd had on Sheila Perry, the society reporter who'd married and left the paper.

"And before Sheila there was another girl, Jane Thorpe, a feature writer you'd rushed around just like nobody's business. Yes, old thing, your weakness for skylarking, love-making and courting was no secret around here, and more than one of your fellow reporters warned me that my turn would come next."

"The sons o' guns—the old gossips!" Pat grinned contemplatively. "Why didn't they attend to their own business and let mine alone, for it was that warning that made you give me the cold shoulder, wasn't it?"

Marcia nodded, laughed, and put up the dust cloth. "But you should worry about that now, Pat, when I'll never give you the cold shoulder again—never as long as I live! I couldn't, even if I wanted to, you've been too grand to me, responding to my S O S call from the hospital with the fifty dollars which I needed so desperately."

"Pshaw, that was nothing," deprecated Pat. "My only regret is that you didn't rest till you got it paid

back. I don't see why you couldn't forget it, at least while you were sick, as I begged you to."

"With Cas," which was Marcia's and all the other reporters' name for Julian Caswell, the city editor, behind his back, "sending up my salary check just the same as if I'd earned it, I couldn't see any good reason for not returning your money."

And, glancing pensively out of a close-by window at the Battery and beyond to the harbor, "There's no way I could ever repay you, though, except in appreciation, for writing my last copy on our 'Beggar Maid' series. Some job, that three-column story, about the Club-For-Girls-Out-Of-Work!"

"How long did it take me? An hour at the outside. And who did all the brain work? You dictated the article, every word of it, and I had the time of my life batting it out on my portable up in your cozy, homy living room.

"But," continued Pat, "talking about that 'Beggar Maid' series, Marcia, you should just see the stack of enthusiastic letters that rolled in here about it. But that's no wonder, for the stuff ran so darn true. I even heard old Cas say—and you know how hard he is to please—that the stories, from first to last, read as if they'd been based on fact and not as if they'd just been pulled out of some reporter's imagination. You're a dog-gone smart kid, and I'm proud of you."

"Nothing smart about making stuff ring true when it is true. All I did was to write up actual experience material! I just stuck to the facts."

"And made your facts mighty entertaining at the same time," complimented Pat. "Yeah, everything considered, that was a slick stunt you pulled off, old darling, rigging yourself out in that beggar-maid garb and going around spending days and nights in New York's charitable institutions, getting the low-down on 'em—the aid, food, clothing and so on, that they're handing out to the poor devils who appeal to them. And the way you hid your identity—that was a stunt in itself!"

Marcia took another peek at the harbor, then turned back to Pat and said:

"I knew better than not to keep my identity a secret, after Cas made me promise, take an oath, cross my heart and I don't know what all else to give nobody outside the *Courier* even an inkling of who or what I was. That was the reason I took no chances and registered under a different name every place I went."

"Wise baby, to have put over a tough job like that. And just because you *did* deliver the goods in such swell style, I'm going to let you pick your own assignment for to-day."

Marcia's eyes opened wide. *You're* going to let me pick it. What are you doing, Pat, trying to two-time me?"

"Not on your life! Cas had to go to court, to give testimony before the grand jury on some matter or other and he phoned me just a minute before you blew in that he wanted me to take charge of the city room."

"So you're my boss! How funny!" Marcia had a good laugh at the thought.

"Laugh all you like," invited Pat in a reproving tone. But it was his voice only that reproved, for his gray eyes twinkled merrily as he added: "Yeah, this is one day when all *Courier* reporters are going to march to the orders of Patrick Sartwell. All except you, that is. As I said, *you* can choose your own assignment."

Her laugh over, Marcia got down to business, put on her thinking cap, and exclaimed:

"I know a grand story I can dig up for to-day, Pat! Remember that girl you flirted with at the Granada Club, that Medella Rolston? You gave me her card the day before I got hurt——"

"Oh, Breach-of-Promise Medella, that cute-looking little jury-vamp who bragged to me about having won three breach of promise suits in a row—one in Chicago, one in Los Angeles and another just recently in Buffalo! That is a bright idea, you ought to get a swell story out of that baby, sure enough. So just scamper up to her penthouse. She told me she lived in a penthouse at——"

"At One Thousand Park Avenue," recalled Marcia.

"Righto! You don't forget anything, do you, beautiful? Well, the trick will be to make Medella explain how she vamped three juries into bringing in verdicts for her. That's a record. Heart balm cases are usually hard as the devil to win, you know."

"I know." Marcia reached for the chic blue felt, tucked her curls into it, gathered up pencils and notebook and started toward the door.

"Say," called out Pat, "you just do the interviewing and give me the dope, and I'll knock out the story for you, Marcia, if your wrist begins to hurt again."

"You're a peach Pat." What a kind, considerate friend he was, getting more and more likable all the time! "But with Cas gone, I'm sure you'll have all you can say grace over to-day. Besides, you've batted out enough stuff for me already."

Pat moved up two or three steps closer, into whispering distance, and said: "I'd bat out stuff for you to the end of time, pretty baby, if that would make you care for me."

"I do care for you. A whole lot."

"Not in the way I want you to care, honey. I want you to love me. Love me *and*—— Oh, well"—seeing several pairs of observing eyes upon him—"this is not the time or the place to go into that. That's the state you've got me in, though, Marcia. But run

on up to Park Avenue and after business hours, away from all this gang, we can talk about whatever we want to, can't we?"

On her ride uptown in the Lexington Avenue subway, Pat's last words kept ringing in Marcia's ears—"we can talk about whatever we want to."

What had he meant to say when alert reportorial glances had stopped him so abruptly?

The train stopped with a jerk and Marcia, at the end of her subway journey, set out on the ten-minute walk which landed her at the de luxe apartment house numbered One Thousand Park Avenue.

CHAPTER VIII

THE JURY-VAMP

DIRECTED to the fifteenth floor by a clerk, Marcia bumped into two baggage men and four trunks just outside Medella Rolston's penthouse.

The way cleared after a moment or two, Marcia rang the bell, which was promptly answered by a blonde, striking for all her petiteness, not only because of her dimples, but also because of the huge jade hoop that dangled from her left ear, the right ear being free from such conspicuous and weighty encumbrance.

Introducing herself, Marcia stated the purpose of her call, and the dimpled blonde invited her into the living room and gestured her to a squatty satinwood chair, a perfect example of the ultramodern in furniture.

Marcia and Medella sat down.

"And what did you want to interview me about?" asked the jury-vamp, hooking the white plaited-chiffon cuffs of her black crêpe frock.

Marcia eyed her, sized her up as a subject and replied, smiling: "About all the lawsuits you've won.

You certainly must have had a way with juries. They're usually so hard-boiled in a breach-of-promise cases."

"That's what people say. And yet," half laughing, "all the juries I've appeared before have been just wonderful to me. But no doubt that was because I must have had a way with them, as you say. Tell me, though, how you happened to come up this morning? How did you know all about my success in winning verdicts. I'm curious."

"Pat Sartwell told me."

"Pat Sartwell! Pat Sartwell!" Medella evidently recalled Pat's name only vaguely, if at all.

So Marcia said: "Don't you remember meeting him about two weeks ago at the Granada Club? I think he said you danced together a lot."

Medella had met and danced with so many men at the Granada, her favorite New York night club, that it took quite a little describing on Marcia's part and quite a little brain cudgeling on her own before she finally exclaimed:

"Oh, yes, now I know who he is! He's a swell-looking guy, isn't he, with marvelous, flashing teeth? And *can* he dance? And now it all comes back—our meeting, and the fun that followed. We had several cocktails together, finishing with a bottle of champagne. Then Pat brought me home in a taxi and I told him the story of my life—all about the thousands

I collected from breach-of-promise verdicts. And when he looked at me doubtfully, I invited him to check me up by accounts of the trials in back newspapers."

That Pat *had* checked on Medella's story and, to his astonishment, found it true, Marcia was fully aware. Otherwise she wouldn't have been at One Thousand Park Avenue. Being there, though, and having wasted enough time on preliminaries, she said:

"Pat and I work on the same paper." And taking pencil and pad from her purse, an up-to-the-minute blue suède envelope affair, with a pearl clasp, "We're both reporters on the *New York Courier*, and he thought if I'd come up here you would be gracious enough to furnish me some extra details; that you wouldn't mind giving me your own explanation of your extraordinary success in court. That should make a knock-out story."

Medella tightened the screw of the unwieldy earring which had become loosened, regarded herself approvingly in a mirror on the opposite wall, and very obligingly began:

"Well, first of all, I got my 'evidence,' see? Letters from the sugar daddies I played around with. You know what I mean—letters in which they'd proposed marriage. I always believed in getting things like that down in black and white. Yes, indeed-y! Then after the old boys went back on their promises, for

one reason or another, I just rushed out, engaged a lawyer and sued 'em."

Marcia's pencil, keeping pace with Medella's tongue, stopped only when it stopped. "And after you brought the suits?" It was a gentle reportorial prod.

"After I brought the suits I always dolled up in my cutest clothes and went into court with my evidence."

"Letters from the sugar daddies containing the offers of marriage, that's what you're talking about, isn't it?"

"Nothing else but, and with my lawyers reading the letters, asking me questions and leading me on, I just sat in the witness chair and in a sad, weepy way told the jurymen——"

A ring at the doorbell cut in on the interview and prevented a further recounting of just what Medella *had* told the jurymen.

"Who is that?" Medella grumbled. "I let my maid go this morning and will have to answer the door myself. But you'll excuse me, won't you? I'll be back in a jiffy."

It was quite some time, however, before Medella reappeared and when she did finally fling open the French doors opening into the reception room where she'd been detained, Marcia spied in her hand a big wad of currency and some kind of folded document.

"Guess you thought I'd never get back." Medella's

eyes were dancing. "But talk about surprises, I've just had the biggest one of my life! Gee, but I'm excited! The most amazing thing happened in the reception room. Now if you'll promise not to let it get into the paper, I'll tell you what it was."

Marcia, glancing curiously at the bills and the folded paper which Medella held in her hand, promised, and the jury-vamp in a burst of confidence, said:

"A man I never saw before paid me ten grand to sign this agreement——" Medella held up the roll of bills and the folded paper, "to beat it out of the U. S. A. and to stay out for a year."

"No wonder you got excited, receiving ten thousand dollars from a perfect stranger. But didn't the fellow tell you who he was and why he was willing to pay you such a sum to leave the country?"

"Yes, when I asked his name he said it was James Frazier, but he went on to explain that he'd come here in the interest of another party who'd sent me the money.

"He was determined to keep the name of the other man dark. He asked why it really mattered to me, so long as I got the money. And after thinking things over I decided it didn't really matter, and signed the old agreement. Now just look what I got by one stroke of the pen—all this." She waved the bills before Marcia's eyes.

"And without even knowing whom you have to thank for the gift!"

"Isn't it so? But whoever the fellow is, the joke's on him all right."

"I don't get you," said Marcia as Medella indulged in hearty laughter.

"Of course you don't, my dear. You couldn't, possibly. But the reason I said the joke's on the unknown who's made me a present of this big stack of bills and the reason I'm so tickled is this: Before this James Frazier breezed in here I had my plans all made to leave in an hour for Mexico City—with my husband. That's where we're going to live."

"With your husband! Now that is news! I had no idea you were married!"

"I guess not. I wasn't till this morning. And that reminds me, I signed my maiden name, Medella Rolston, to that agreement without even thinking. But that's no skin off my elbow, is it, when I'm ten grand to the good and old James Frazier's none the wiser? Where were we in the interview, though? I'll be obliged to talk fast to finish it. Carlos Esperino—that's my husband—will be here in a few minutes and we'll have to beat it to the station."

"Of course you'll have to make it snappy," said Marcia. "No one could understand that better than I do. But you were telling me when we were interrupted that you dolled up in your cutest clothes, went

to court, sat in the witness chair and in a sad, weepy way, told the jurymen——”

“Oh, yes! That’s where I left off, wasn’t it? Well, I just told them how the defendants had broken my heart, ruined my life, and all that sort of thing.”

“I see. And just one thing more. Or two things more,” corrected Marcia, standing up. “Will you let me have a couple of your photographs? To use in connection with this story.”

“If I had them I would. Gladly. But, what a shame, all my pictures went away, in one of Carlos’s trunks, just before you came in!”

“A bad break for the *Courier*, isn’t it? We’ll just have to print the story without pictures, though, won’t we? But as to the other thing I spoke of, you don’t mind if I add a paragraph or so about your marriage, do you? That would give a romantic twist to the interview.”

“Write all you please about the marriage. You can say that Carlos is a dancer in a Mexico City cabaret, and that I just know our lives are going to ripple along, we’re so wild about each other.”

“All right, I will say just that, and now so long, Medella Rolston Esperino. Many, many thanks for being so nice to me, and I hope you’ll have the grandest kind of trip to Mexico City!”

CHAPTER IX

IN MARCIA'S APARTMENT

PAT, busy at Cas's desk late in the afternoon, looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of Marcia as she joined the file of reporters who were leaving for the day.

Overtaking her near the door, he said: "What's the big idea? Why the hurry? I'd counted on our having dinner together to-night. Don't tell me you're off to keep some other date. That would be *too* disappointing. I have something on my mind I want to take up with you—the thing I started this morning and couldn't very well finish here in the city room. How about dining with me? Can you make it?"

"Uh huh, I can make it, Pat. How long before you'll be through with what you are doing?"

"Just a few minutes. I have only a little stuff to clean up. It wouldn't be nice to leave Cas's desk in a mess, would it?"

"It surely wouldn't. I'll stick around. Take your time."

"Sweet girl, but I'll step on it."

And he did.

Outside the *Courier* building, Pat asked: "Where do we go from here? Name your restaurant. Any old place will suit me."

"Any old place? Let's see. Maybe you'd like to eat up in my apartment for a change. You're always eating in cafés, restaurants and night clubs, aren't you?"

"I certainly am, and *would* it be a treat to dine with you in your little home! That place has a lure for me, honey; one terribly hard to resist. I hate to have you stirring around in an old hot kitchen, however."

"You flatter me, calling my kitchenette a kitchen," laughed Marcia.

"My error." Pat laughed, too. "Well, whatever it is, kitchen or kitchenette, after the strenuous day you've put in at the *Courier*, I don't want you wearing yourself out over a stove. You've been a convalescent for a couple o' weeks, remember, and I'll bet you're plenty tired already."

"Not a speck tired. Anyhow, my frigidaire is full of good things—cooked, too—and all I'd have to do would be to warm them. Now are you sufficiently tempted?"

"I was tempted when you mentioned your apartment. I hesitated only because I was thinking of your health."

"You can forget that now. It's perfect."

"You *do* look all right, sure enough." You look great," Pat added, admiring her cheeks which were enviably pink with a natural pinkness, and her eyes which shone with the sparkle of youthful animation. "Only after being on sick leave for fourteen or fifteen days, I imagined you couldn't be exactly up to scratch. Since you say I'm wrong, though, let's flag down a cab and ride to your apartment."

The taxi flagged, it wasn't long before they were in Marcia's living room, sitting on her prize piece of furniture, an old-rose tapestried Duncan Phyfe sofa, inherited from her grandmother—and making merry over the "feast" spread out before them.

The happy, not to say hilarious guest, who'd insisted on setting the table, also insisted on clearing it when they'd finished dinner.

"To keep peace," Marcia first sighed, then smiled at the same time, "I guess I may as well let you. I always did despise arguments."

Pat lighted a cigarette before starting with his first trayful of dishes into the kitchenette.

"Your bus boy's through with his job," he announced, letting down the sides of the gate-leg table on which they had dined and standing the table against the wall in its customary place. "That's what they call the fellows in restaurants who carry dishes from dining room to kitchen, you know."

"Is it? And the *Courier's* star reporter has degenerated into a bus boy?" Marcia fixed Pat with a teasing stare.

"I didn't say *a* bus boy, old darling, but *your* 'bus boy'—and between the two what a difference!" With that correction made, Pat settled back on the sofa and took three or four puffs on his cigarette. Then: "To pick up where I left off this morning: You have a pretty good idea of what I had on my mind, haven't you?"

"No, frankly, I haven't," replied Marcia. "To tell the truth, you had me so tantalized, so curious that I just let my imagination run away with me all day long. I jumped from idea to idea, or rather from guess to guess, trying to finish out for myself that sentence of yours."

"Now you're stalling," accused Pat. "You must've seen I was paving the way to propose. You couldn't have helped seeing that, Marcia, after our being together practically every night for the last two weeks and—and after my getting it over to you in all kinds of ways what you'd come to mean to me. You know, I've told you plenty of times that I consider you a grand and glorious kid—the grandest and most glorious I could ever imagine."

"I also know," said Marcia, smiling more broadly than before, "that everybody on the *Courier* calls you

'Lothario'—so wouldn't I have been foolish to take all you said seriously? The pretty speeches of ladies' men——"

"Even ladies' men change," cut in Pat, "when love hits 'em. And granting that I was flirtatious, that I did play around with quite a few girls before I met you—afterward, too, while you were giving me the air—my philandering days are all over now, honey, if you'll marry me. I was thinking last night as I ambled out of here what a swell go we could make of marriage, you and I; how well we'd hit it off together."

Marcia, realizing from his tone, his manner and the appeal in his eyes how deeply in earnest he was, replied:

"You certainly are paying me a high compliment, Pat, the highest a man can ever pay a woman, and I appreciate it tremendously.

"But"—remembering a recent confidence of his—one that hadn't come as a surprise, however, since it was common city-room gossip—Marcia asked: "Do you really feel that you *should* marry again, when you have a divorced wife and a little daughter over in Philadelphia to support? Aren't you already loaded with enough responsibility?"

"Most assuredly no, for I haven't you, see? Marry me, sweetness, whenever you will, but," impetuously,

"kiss me now and say you love and trust me enough to do as I ask."

While Marcia considered his requests, Pat pulled her head down on his shoulder and there she let it remain as he stroked her hair affectionately. She also let him kiss her, thinking of the supreme way in which he had just honored her; of the innumerable kindnesses he'd showered upon her since her flight from the Sixteenth Street Hospital in such suffering and distress.

"'Yes' is your answer, isn't it?" Pat's inflection was even more coaxing than his words.

"And if it isn't, do you want me to tell you?" Marcia, feeling as though she'd rather do anything in the world than hurt or disappoint this best of boy friends, added: "You're impulsive. I am, too, so I believe we both should take some time, enough to make sure, absolutely sure of ourselves and our feelings——"

"I'm already sure of myself and my feelings. Make no mistake about that." Pat's interruption couldn't have been more emphatic. "But"—again running his fingers through the waves of Marcia's hair which he admired so extravagantly—"if there's any danger of your handing me a flat 'No' to-night, I'll just yield to your suggestion right quick, so far as you're concerned, and give you time to decide what to do."

With that understanding established between them, Pat left around midnight and Marcia, latching the hall door behind him, turned out the living-room lights, passed into the bedroom, switched on a boudoir lamp and started getting ready for bed.

A gay-looking little figure—or rather, it was only her striking pajamas, green silk coat and yellow silk trousers that were gay, for here eyes were soberly reflective—she sat down in front of the dressing table, cupped her head in her hands and thought over Pat's proposal.

Perhaps, after some meditation, it wouldn't be such a bad idea to accept it. Perhaps she could go far and do much, much worse than to cast her lot with Pat Sartwell. No denying his charm, his winning manner and his bigness of heart. And where could any girl ever find a jollier companion?

Still, upon deeper reflection, with Pat there'd never been any romantic soarings in any way comparable to those she'd experienced so briefly in the Sixteenth Street Hospital. But even if Nelson Trawick had swept her to those sentimental heights, even if he had shown her what a wonderfully glorious thing love *can* be, how his blandishments and sham wooing had tricked and deceived her! And to think that all the time he was thrilling her with endearments he was engaged to Louise Stovall, whom he "just adored."

Dalton had said he "adored" her, and that to him

Marcia Reynolds had been only "a pathetic hospital case."

Well, she wasn't that to Pat Sartwell. She was the girl he wanted to marry. And in Pat's courting there'd been no trickery or deceit. He had admitted with commendable candor to past flirtations. But he had also said he was all through philandering if she would only be his wife.

Marcia, convinced that she could depend upon Pat Sartwell to live up to that declaration, put out the boudoir lamp and crept into bed.

CHAPTER X

NEWS OF A MARRIAGE

NELSON, for two whole weeks—ever since the day he'd left the Home-For-Girls-Out-Of-Work in such a disconsolate frame of mind—had declined invitation after invitation from the Stovalls, father, mother and daughter. And for the reason he'd been in no mood to go anywhere or talk to anybody.

But Harvey Stovall, fully as determined as his wife to have Nelson Trawick for their son-in-law, had no notion of allowing this aloofness to continue. Which resolution accounted for his unexpected arrival at Nelson's apartment in the Lausanne late one afternoon, the day Marcia went back to work and the very same day her Medella Rolston story appeared in the *Courier*.

"Hel-lo, stranger!" said Louise's father when Nelson opened the door. And with a lingering, even a paternal handshake, "I just came by, son, to scold you for giving us such a wide berth lately; also to cart you off bodily and take you down home to dinner, if I can't get you there any other way."

Nelson invited his unexpected and—if he'd been

willing to admit the truth to himself—unwelcome guest, inside.

"Sit down, Mr. Stovall, won't you?"

"Thanks," said Stovall, choosing a chair close to a window that looked down on fashionable Sutton Place, "but I'll be here only a few minutes. I only dropped by to get you, as I said."

"It was awfully good of you to go to all this trouble, but——"

"Now, now, no buts, my boy," admonished the insistent visitor as he twisted up the ends of his short gray mustache. "I've had my orders and I know better than to walk in without you."

Nelson, who'd remained standing and scowling, unconsciously scowling ever since he'd opened the door, said, "Your orders? I don't understand."

"Well," laughing, "that's because you aren't a married man. What I meant was this: Mrs. Stovall telephoned me at the office to come up here and take you home with me to dinner. And no sooner had that command been given than Louise seized the receiver and told me not to dare show up without you."

"So you see the position I'm in. You also see what your society means to my family. We've felt horribly neglected, all of us."

What he said about Mrs. Stovall and Louise prodding him to bring Nelson with him was true, but Harvey Stovall had already decided to do that very

thing on his own accord. Early that morning, Mrs. Stovall had turned over to her husband Nelson's love letter to Marcia which the nurse had intercepted. This had decided Harvey Stovall to face Nelson and force him to resume his visits to the Stovall home.

"Why *have* you neglected us, Nelse?" Stovall asked in a tone of deep concern. "Home hasn't seemed like home without you. Here I've been back from South America all this time and you haven't been around even once. If I hadn't always tried to be your friend; if I hadn't always thought so much of you, your staying away wouldn't have hurt so much."

Nelson, recalling his debt of gratitude to this gray-haired man who'd made it possible for him to complete his university education, was suddenly overcome with a sense of guilt, of shame. The guilt and shame of an ingrate! How utterly selfish he'd been to allow his grief over Marcia to get him so completely that he'd treated his benefactor and his benefactor's family in this shabby manner!

"I'll go with you, Mr. Stovall," he said with a semblance of a smile. "Will you wait here in the living room while I change into dinner things?"

"Sure, sure. I'll wait, gladly."

Gertrude Stovall, elegant in silver lace and with pearls about her neck, on her arms and her fingers,

joined Nelson in the drawing-room while Louise and her father were upstairs dressing for dinner.

"The pleasure of seeing you again, Nelse! If I'd only known in time that you were coming to-night I would've had the fatted calf killed for the prodigal." She smiled as pleasantly as though she'd said something really clever, something really original. "But, anyway, I guess dinner won't be so bad."

"It will be excellent, I am sure," said Nelson. "And I speak from experience."

"You always do say such nice things, don't you, dear? "But"—sitting up a bit too stiffly in one of the Queen Anne chairs, the one nearest the sofa from which Nelson had arisen upon her entrance—"before the others come down I want to tell you about poor little Louise. She's been absolutely heartbroken because you haven't been to see her in two whole weeks. Nothing I could say or do seemed to cheer or console her in the least. That blessed child's happiness is in your hands, Nelse. You can't imagine how she worships you."

Nelson, perturbed and miserable, studied the pattern in the carpet. And Gertrude Stovall, seeing his perturbation and divining the reason for it—his love and longing for that "little nobody"—reached for the late afternoon edition of the *Courier* which lay on a table almost at her elbow. And glancing at it, she exclaimed with rehearsed nonchalance:

"Oh, by the way, Nelse, have you seen this story about that girl who ran out in front of your car that day we were on our way to the pier to meet Louise. It's quite interesting."

Nelson gripped the arm of the divan.

"No," he replied. "I haven't seen any story about Marcia Reynolds. Do you mean to say there's something in to-day's paper about her?"

"Not about Marcia Reynolds, but about Medella Rolston, for that's her right name. The other's an alias."

"How did *you* know that?" asked Nelson.

But his question did not catch Mrs. Stovall unprepared. Far from it! She said: "Why, I called up the hospital the day following the accident to find out how the girl was getting along. I was sorry for her, you see. To my amazement, the special nurse told me she'd just left. Under the most suspicious circumstances, and in such mad haste that she actually forgot her purse.

"So"—as she watched Nelson's discomfiture which was only too apparent—"the nurse, wishing to return the pocketbook, looked inside for an address. She found only a visiting card with Medella Rolston's name on it and several other things which convinced her beyond all doubt that the patient she'd been taking care of wasn't the poor working girl out of a job she'd pretended to me, but was an impostor, a

masquerader and no telling what else, for in to-day's paper I notice she's even described as a 'jury-vamp.'

"Still"—in a tone almost pious—"no matter what she was, let us hope she's happy now—with her new husband. Maybe," holding the paper out to him, "you'd like to see the story yourself, Nelse. As I said, it's quite interesting."

Nelson seized the *Courier* and read the three-and-a-half column story about Medella Rolston who had married Carlos Esperino, a Spanish cabaret dancer, and who was now en route with him to their future home in Mexico City.

So *she*, that gorgeous creature on whom he'd lavished all his love, was the bride of a dancer in a cabaret!

Shocked, crushed, Nelson laid the paper down without comment and, looking up, caught sight of Louise, in a yellow mousseline dancing frock, fluttering into the room.

"Oh, Nelse," she complained, clinging to his arm, "why have you stayed away so long? What were you doing, deliberately trying to break my heart? Well," poutingly, "if you were, you succeeded all right, didn't he, Gertie?"

"That's exactly what I told him before you came in, darling. Isn't her frock becoming, Nelse? Doesn't she look perfectly precious in yellow?"

"Yellow suits her well," Nelson agreed with as much enthusiasm as he could muster.

"Glad you think so, old de-ah, for you'll be looking at this dress a long, long time. Yes, after dinner we're going to the wildest, most exciting night club in Greenwich Village: The Sign of the Dragon. And how we *will* prance about! Till the wee sma' hours of the morning!"

What had he gotten into by coming to dinner at the Stovalls? If there was anything in the wide, wide world he didn't want to do it was to go dancing at a wild Greenwich Village night club. Yet, after having avoided Louise for two entire weeks, first on one pretext, then another, what decent or just excuse could he find to refuse her this simple request?

At the club, while they chatted over cocktails, Nelson looking about at the mural paintings of dragons, winged serpents and other weird monsters, remarked: "This is a snaky-looking place all right. How did you know about it, Louise? I never heard of it until you mentioned it to-night."

"Nelson Trawick, you old behind-the-times thing!" laughed Louise, as she refrained from answering his question. Why should she be so silly as to tell him the truth, that it was the swanky Tom Elting who'd introduced her to the night club when that was one of her innermost secrets, one she intended to keep a secret from Nelson as long as she lived.

He, not even noticing the evasion and trying to be agreeably dutiful, said: "Want to dance?"

"I'd adore it."

And dance they did. Countless times, until Louise finally suggested that they go home.

Back in the drawing-room, forcing her cuddlings upon him, she said: "Gee, Nelse, it's been the most marvelous evening! I've been so happy to be with you again." And cooing on, "I'm just perfectly mad about you, old top. But that's the way it should be when we're going to be married, isn't it?"

Nelson recalled his intention of two weeks before—only two weeks, when with all that had happened to him it seemed like a century—to break off his engagement just so he might marry the girl on whom he'd bestowed the one great, the only real love of his whole life. But with that girl married and gone, and with Louise protesting her love with words and with affectionate demonstrations, could he have the heart to inflict needless suffering upon her? Having suffered so excruciatingly himself, he shrank even from the idea of hurting any one else.

But after having said good night to Louise, he went back to his brooding over that "gorgeous, gorgeous creature" who was beyond his reach forever.

CHAPTER XI

BITTER MEMORIES

FOR three months Pat and Marcia had been almost inseparable, going here, there, everywhere, as fancy dictated.

"But to-night, cuteness," he said, "I want to take you to something that is something—to the swellest affair imaginable, if you'll let me."

"What is it?" Marcia was putting on her hat to leave the *Courier* for the day.

"To a grand presailing ball on the *Europa*. The ship shoves off at midnight and I'll have to go aboard to interview a couple of departing notables."

"Then you'll be busy."

"Only a part of the time, and while I'm on the job you can dance with some of the ship's officers. I know 'em well, and most of them have very grand manners and are swell steppers besides. Yeah, with those fellows hanging around, you won't have any dull, wall-flower moments. I'll guarantee it. So to please me, will you doll up in your prettiest frock and come along?"

"I won't miss it. This will be a regular lark for me to go dancing with you on the ritzy *Europa*."

So Marcia, as chic as she was beautiful in a sea-foam jacket gown, boarded the de luxe liner and swept into the ballroom on Pat's arm.

"Now watch 'em come!" he smiled, as six officers spying Marcia and himself trooped toward them. "Can't even let us have one dance together before rushing over to meet you, honey," he grumbled proudly. "But I don't know as I can blame 'em, you look so dazzling."

Pat presented the sextet, all nice-enough-looking in their Teutonic way, then glided off with his fair partner to the strains of a Viennese waltz.

"When I'm doing my stuff for the paper—getting the interviews, you know," said Pat, "those gallants can have their turns, can't they? That's generous enough, isn't it?"

Marcia smiled her approval and he, enchanted with the music and with Marcia's grace and loveliness, continued to put pleasure before business and remained in the ballroom, sometimes dancing, sometimes strolling, for more than two hours.

"Have you forgotten what you came aboard ship for, ostensibly anyhow," reminded Marcia, as they danced an encore. "If you don't look out, the boat will shove off and you won't have your interviewing done."

"I've never fallen down on an assignment yet," bragged Pat, his eyes twinkling. "I *am* going after

the celebs in a few minutes, though, so don't get nervous. But I want you to tell me what you think of this ballroom. Doesn't it spell class with its blue-and-gold mosaic ceiling and its four huge wall tableaux! The one we are dancing toward symbolizes jazz."

"So it does. Good old American jazz. And the next one we're stepping up to now?" asked Marcia.

"Carnival," said Pat, and as they approached the third. "That portrays the tango."

"I would have known it without any telling, for the dancers in it are doing the 'scissors,' aren't they?"

"Right, as usual, baby."

The encore ended, leaving them in front of the fourth and last painting, which it was easy enough to see, represented the waltz.

Standing at the entrance of the ballroom a moment afterward and watching the *Europa's* passengers and the visitors who had gone aboard to see them off—men all fashionably attired and women in daringly modish gowns and aglitter with jewels—Marcia exclaimed:

"Gee, Pat, I wouldn't take anything for having come with you to-night! I'm having such a thrilling evening—enjoying the ship, the people, the music, the dancing——"

"And," cut in Pat, "it's now time to enjoy some refreshments, don't you think? So let's slide into the

bar. Even if we can't get so-called intoxicants while the ship's still in port, we can get all I'll need for cocktails, for in my flask there's plenty o' good stuff. Come on, let me show you what a swell cocktail mixer I am! The bar's to your right. Six steps and we'll be in it."

They took the steps and were soon sipping "side-cars."

"Not so bad, eh?" boasted Pat, draining his glass.

"Not so weak, either," smiled Marcia, draining hers.

"Didn't I tell you? And my only regret is that I can't stay here with you and indulge in more. But"—looking at his watch—"I've got to get down to business now—or never. Yeah, I'll have to start the hunt for my notables, won't I?"

"You certainly will. But who are the notables, Pat? I forgot to ask. Anybody I know, do you suppose?"

Pat named first an English artist whom Marcia knew only by reputation. Then he said: "The other celeb is the winner of that twenty-five-thousand-dollar architectural prize recently awarded by the Russian Soviet government. He not only copped the prize, that guy, with a design for a skyscraper he'd submitted, he also copped a commission to go to Leningrad and draw plans for several other buildings."

"You—you don't—don't mean—Nelson Trawick, do you, Pat?"

"I don't mean anybody else. Didn't you read the story about his winning this big prize? You must have."

"I—I did. I—had no—no idea, however, that he'd—he'd be on the—on the *Europa* to-night."

"Neither had I till I discovered his name on the ship's sailing list. But"—eying Marcia, with a teasing sort of anxiousness—"since when did my little sweetheart take to stammering? Can't she stand up under just one cocktail? I'm amazed, honestly I am."

So Pat attributed her stuttering to the cocktail! How fortunate that he had no inkling of the real cause of her sudden confusion; how lucky he wasn't even aware of her acquaintance with Nelson! Her pulse was galloping and she struggled for breath. Nelson aboard the *Europa*!

"Sure enough, Marcia, no joking, did that drink go to your head?" Pat's tone was regretfully solicitous. "I simply won't leave you if you aren't all right. The old interviews can just go hang."

"I'm all right," she insisted as he paid for the high balls, "and if you don't hurry and interview those notables, I'll be perfectly furious."

"You will dance with the officers and have a good time till I get back?" he conditioned.

"If any ask me I will," she replied, laughing.

Marcia had regained control of her tongue and her emotions—at least for the moment.

“If any ask you to!” said Pat, chuckling. “Now you sound like yourself again. You’ll just have to shoo ‘em off in order to take on one at a time, after I’m out of sight.”

“You’re telling *me*! Now, run on so I can start the shooing, if there should be anything to your prediction. But let me stay here alone for a moment. I want to finish this glass of water. I’m terribly thirsty.”

“All right, little dear, I’ll be seeing you.”

Marcia *was* alone only a moment, too. For hardly had Pat Sartwell disappeared before an officer rushed up to her and said:

“The orchestra has just swung into a waltz and your boy friend has gone at last. I passed him out in the ship’s corridor. Will you dance with me? I’ve been watching and waiting for this chance all evening.”

Marcia, now that she knew Nelson Trawick was aboard, had no desire at all to dance—unless she could dance with him. Then only the ecstasy of floating around in his arms *could* be hers!

Marcia’s heart leaped at the thought, the mere possibility! All of which made her marvel at and deplore at the same time the power and persistence of her love for the young architect who, after dis-

tinguishing himself in his own country, was now going to Russia to design American skyscrapers for the Soviet government.

How suddenly, spontaneously, irresistibly that love of hers had come into being! Yet to persons of her nature and temperament, didn't such an affection come just that way, if at all? Before meeting Nelson Trawick had she ever been even mildly thrilled by any man? Boy friends, many of them amusing, interesting and entertaining, she'd had in plenty, of course. Still, they'd remained merely boy friends. Never had she regarded one of them as a sweetheart.

Then, breath taking as it all seemed now, when she'd least expected it, she had been transported to the seventh heaven of romance by Nelson Trawick—only to learn shortly afterward that her credulity, her susceptibility to his compliments and protestations had paved the way for everlasting regrets and suffering. But to think, after all these months of separation, that she and Nelson were now on the same ship!

"Ah, but you look sad as you sit there meditating," observed the tall, gallant Teuton who'd been hovering silently over the table awaiting Marcia's answer. "You look as though you'd just thought of something unpleasant; as though unhappy memories had begun to plague you all of a sudden. Now if you don't feel like dancing, may I not sit and talk with you and cheer you up? A person so lovely and so young

shouldn't be allowed to remain sad, not," with a smile, "for more than sixty seconds at the most—and here I've been waiting three whole minutes for your mood to change and for you to tell me I might have this waltz before it's too late! It must be half over already."

"Is it really?" Marcia looked up at the *Europa's* officer. "I *was* thinking about something not—not exactly pleasant," she admitted. "I didn't know, though, that I'd been so impolite as to keep you standing there three whole minutes. Forgive me, please." And realizing with a start, that if she remained out of the ballroom, she'd probably have no opportunity to see Nelson, she added: "Let's dance now, shall we? Half a waltz is better than none at all, isn't it?"

"In this case it will be infinitely better. Ah, yes, to dance with the loveliest lady aboard ship is an honor I've been craving since first I laid eyes on you, even before Mr. Sartwell introduced us!"

So off they went, the *Courier's* girl reporter and the ship's officer, whose dancing was perfect and whose conversation would have been diverting and cheering, if only Marcia's reflections hadn't interfered.

Her reflections and her anticipations, too. For all the while she was dancing, her eyes kept searching the room for a glimpse of Nelson. When would he come? When, when, when?

But at the end of the waltz and the encore, he had

not appeared. There was time yet, however. Anyway, mightn't it be that Pat was detaining Nelson in his suite, interviewing him? And why hadn't that probability suggested itself to her before?

Still hoping, Marcia danced not only with the officer who'd tried to cheer her up, but also with each of the other five officers. All of which kept her in the ballroom and on the *qui vive* for a very considerable time.

But her continuous dancing, her expectancy and her vigilance brought nothing except disappointment, since so far as Marcia knew, Nelson Trawick had not come near the dancing salon.

Presently she and Pat started to leave the ship with a steadily increasing line of visitors.

So she was going ashore and Nelson was going across the Atlantic—to far, far-away Russia!

"What's the matter with my pretty baby? She seems so pensive and melancholy." One of the *Europa's* powerful lights shining on Marcia's face like a stage spotlight, as they lingered on the pier at the foot of the gangway, had exposed to Pat's observing eye the despondency reflected on her countenance. "I thought you'd have one jolly old time dancing and that you'd leave the boat in high glee. Instead you look as if you'd just lost your very best friend."

So her wretchedness was apparent, unmistakable, even!

"Do I really look as woebegone as all that?" Marcia asked, smiling wanly.

"Well," Pat eyed her closely, "that little smile, cheerless though it is, has brightened you a trifle, anyhow, but," gripping her arm suddenly, "want to see the two notables I've just interviewed? They're both out there on deck."

To get a glimpse of Nelson Trawick before the ship shoved off! Yes, a mere glimpse from that distance would be better than not seeing him at all.

"Where, where *are* the notables, Pat?" Marcia asked eagerly. "I certainly would like to see them."

"The British celeb, that chap with the goatee, he's one, two, three, four, five—he's the fifth fellow down to the left of the gangway. See him, do you?"

Marcia, following Pat's count, located the painter and gave him a cursory glance before inquiring:

"The other notable, Pat, which side of the gang-plank is he on?"

"On the right. He's that guy standing almost jam-up against the gangway. That tall chap in the dark-blue, double-breasted suit. Look at him there talking to a blonde in a turquoise evening wrap. Yeah, that's Nelson Trawick and the girl's Louise Stovall, his fiancée. She was in his suite when I

interviewed him, but she'd better scram. I bet she's the only visitor left on the *Europa*."

As Pat spoke Marcia spotted Nelson just in time to see Louise throw her arms about his neck in a prolonged farewell embrace. How they must love each other, those two! No wonder he hadn't joined the throng of dancers in the ballroom. In his place what man wouldn't have preferred to be alone with the girl he adored, the girl he expected to marry.

The fool she'd been to indulge the hope that Nelson Trawick might want to one-step or waltz with her! But whether he'd wished to dance with her or not, she would have liked him to see her in her evening gown so different from the beggar-maid outfit she'd worn the day his car struck her down. At least, whatever else he might have thought of her in the past, he could no longer have considered her an object of pity—a pathetic hospital case.

Yes, even though he was going to marry Louise, who still had her arms around his neck, Marcia, knew in her heart that it would have given her infinite satisfaction to realize that Nelson had for once beheld her as she really was. But now, with things as they were, he'd simply remember her as a girl he'd first pitied, then perhaps, through a certain sort of sympathy, deceived, made to believe that he loved her. That is, of course, if he remembered her at all, which wasn't likely.

But here she stood on the pier, saddened by regret and grieved by memories. And she'd gone aboard the *Europa* to forget—dance—and be merry!

"Let's go, Pat," Marcia requested. "Let's not hang around any longer. It's been a very large night for me and I feel tired. Terribly tired, somehow or other."

"All right, darling!" And walking along toward the main pier exit, "Even if we are way over in Brooklyn, it won't take us long to get to your place in a taxi, for at this time of night traffic isn't congested, is it?"

During the ride across Brooklyn Bridge, up Broadway and across Thirty-first Street she hardly spoke and at the door of her apartment Pat, considerate, as always, said:

"Much as I hate to leave you, baby, I won't keep you up. I'll be unselfish and beat it so you can hop right into bed. Surely do hope, too, you'll sleep well and get up feeling fresh as a daisy." He patted her shoulder paternally and added: "But if you shouldn't feel all right to-morrow, Marcia, let the old job go hang. Stay home and rest and I'll be up to see you in the evening."

"Oh, I'll be all right and you'll see me at the *Courier*, per usual."

"I bet I will—if you can put one foot before the

other. That's my little overconscientious Marcia. Here I *am* keeping you standing in the doorway, though, after promising to toddle."

With Pat gone, Marcia, in no mood to turn on the light, groped her way from the hall into the living room and threw herself in all her finery on the sofa.

And lying there she thought over and over again of the tortures she'd suffered that evening. Of *all* the tortures, indeed, that had been hers since the morning, months ago now, when she pursued that parrot-picked fortune into the street. The fortune, so accurately prophetic, which had said, "The wheel of love would turn that day."

How the wheel had continued to turn, too! And how it was spinning now! In what mad—and maddening—fashion!

"It's absurd for me to go on like this, letting love for Nelson Trawick make my life a day-after-day tragedy," she mused. And aloud, in a voice of determination, "I should worry about him! I *won't* worry about him, either!"

To strengthen her resolve Marcia attempted a laugh of sheer bravado. But the laugh, somehow, got tangled up in her throat and came out a sob—one that echoed and reëchoed through the blackness of the living room.

CHAPTER XII

MARCIA WONDERS

HAVING gotten up later than usual, Marcia had just finished washing the Sunday breakfast dishes when Pat rang the doorbell.

"Ho, look at my early-bird caller!" she exclaimed, as he stepped into the hall and laid his hat, along with a white square box, on the telephone table before taking her in his arms.

Releasing her, he said: "Guess I *did* hand you a surprise, blowing in here so unexpectedly at ten o'clock on Sunday morning."

"I'll say you did—and what's the explanation? You've told me more than once that you made it a rule long, long time ago, never to get up before noon on Sunday."

"I kept that rule, too, till this morning. Then I broke it for the first time in years. All because of you."

"Because of me?" Marcia looked at him with smiling dubiousness.

"Sure, no foolin'. I woke up thinking about you, see? At half past eight! Imagine that! And when

I looked out of the window and discovered what a perfect October day it was, I decided on the spot that you and I should go picnicking in Van Cortlandt Park. Wasn't that an inspiration—or," grinning, "would you call it presumption?"

Marcia, delighted with the idea of a Sunday outing, agreed that it was an inspiration. "But what about lunch?" she wanted to know. "If you'd only thought of this yesterday, or even last night, I could've fixed something," she added worriedly.

. "Quit your frowning." With his right index finger Pat smoothed out two almost-too-faint-to-be-seen vertical lines on her forehead just as if she'd been a child, and went on, "You see that package there on the table, right beside my hat, don't you? Well, in it are all kinds of good things to eat. I stopped by a delicatessen on my way down and picked 'em out carefully, having in mind what you do and do not like."

"Weren't you thoughtful?"

"Where *you're* concerned, I hope I am. I try to be, anyhow. But slip into street clothes and let's get moving, will you?"

Marcia slipped off the marigold smock she had on, a mandarin coat it was really, and asked, smiling: "Anything wrong with this sports dress? Isn't it good enough for a picnic?"

Pat, admiring the frock, a green-corded silk one,

with plaited skirt, short jacket, rolled collar and long green-and-white polka dot tie, thought it too good.

"Woods are woods," he argued, "no matter how beautiful, and I'm afraid you'll ruin it."

"No, no, I won't," Marcia insisted. "I'll take along an old coat to sit on."

She started for the coat, but Pat, playfully catching hold of the polka dot tie, said:

"I'm as pleased as can be you fell for my picnicking idea the very moment I sprang it on you. Lots of girls would've hemmed and hawed and trumped up all sorts of excuses for not wanting to spend a Sunday in the park. You're a grand sport, though, aren't you, baby? Always unselfish and always agreeable? And you *do* make quick decisions—*nearly* always, don't you?"

Marcia realized the exact purport of that "nearly," all too quickly. She knew Pat was alluding to her indecision about marrying him; or rather, to her failure to give him a definite answer, one way or the other. But she kept perfectly quiet in her embarrassment. And she was conscience-stricken, for Pat Sartwell had been so attentive, so patient.

Pat, reading her thoughts, more or less correctly, said: "Forgive me, dear, if I hurt you, and I see from your eyes that I have. I just let my emotions run away with me, though, spoke on impulse without

thinking, and I *am* human, you know. *Too* human, maybe, when it comes to wanting you.

"Yeah," he went on as Marcia's eyes wandered away from him to the phone table with his hat and the picnic lunch on it, "walking down here I got to thinking, going over the past six months, all the hours we've spent together, with their joys and their thrills, notwithstanding the put-offs I've had to bear up under. And entering this apartment house I shuddered when I thought what a knock-out blow it would be if you ever turned me down flat. I love you, darling, as I never dreamed I *could* love any living woman."

"You're sweet, Pat, too sweet to deserve those put-offs of mine, as you call them."

Two tears hung like suspended dewdrops on Marcia's long, curled-up lashes, then rolled slowly down her cheeks.

In the pocket of her discarded smock—now lying on the telephone stool—she found a handkerchief, and wiping away the tears, continued:

"You'll excuse me for referring to it, won't you, but you've already made one matrimonial mistake, haven't you? I'm assuming it was a mistake, anyhow, since you're divorced—and if I married you and made you unhappy again, I'd just never get over it."

"Not a chance of that ever happening, sweetheart," said Pat. "You're too swell-elegant; too—too—well,

too everything that I want my wife to be. *You* may doubt yourself, your feeling for me, Marcia. But my devotion to you is beyond question. Of that you've had sufficient proof, I hope."

"You've been marvelous; the best, truest, finest, most loyal boy friend I've ever had."

"And *if* I could just get it over to you what you mean to me! Why, kid, since we began playing around together I haven't been able even to think of another girl. They all just look alike to me now, because they're all so inferior compared with you."

Pat continued, urgingly: "Take that into consideration, won't you, please, when you *do* give me your final answer. And maybe if I'm very, very good all day long you'll reward me by telling me once and for always what I can or cannot expect. I don't want to put too much pressure on you, to speed you up unduly. And yet——"

"And yet, you're entitled—after all this time—you're entitled to a definite answer. That's only fair. We can't go on this way forever. I realize that as well as you do, and I'm going to try to decide to-day just what is the best thing for us to do."

"Atta girl!" New-born hope shone in Pat's eyes as he followed her into the living room and said: "Run, get your coat, put on your little bonnet and let's hop to our picnic in the park."

The little bonnet turned out to be a flapperish green

beret from the edge of which escaped a veritable cascade of copperish curls.

"Cuter than ever, aren't you, if such a thing could be?" complimented Pat when Marcia came in from the bedroom all ready for the picnic.

"Gosh, but you're beautiful!" He laid down the news section of the *Courier* which he'd been reading, and went on: "In that béret you look sixteen, not a day older, and you know something? As I stand here gazing at you I'm convinced that there can literally be as much truth as poetry in the lines

*Your beauty mocks the rarest art
With lovely radiance divine,
That strikes deep down into my heart.
And stabs my brain like heady wine.*

"I used to consider that just a lot of poetic bunk, but now that I'm in the same fix as the poet was when he penned those words."

"Oh, ye-ah!" said Marcia. "Well, after that, it's time to scamper to the park."

"O. K.," gathering up the rest of the newspaper which Marcia asked him to take along, "the park will be the very place to finish my rhapsodizing, for I'm in a ravin' mood, I wouldn't kid you."

Outside the apartment house, Pat stopped at the curb.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Marcia.

"For a taxi, naturally. What did you think?"

"Don't be silly," returned Marcia. "It will take ages and ages to ride to Van Cortlandt Park in a taxi. And it will also cost you dollars and dollars. So why not beat it to the subway? That'll get us there in less than half an hour and for a nickel apiece.

"No good reason I can see for tossing away your hard-earned money needlessly, Pat," moving briskly by way of example toward the subway station entrance. "And it is really hard-earned, isn't it? For I see you every day dashing out madly after stories, then dashing just as madly back to write 'em. It keeps anybody on his toes, being a reporter, doesn't it?"

"Uh huh. Still, can you think of any life so packed with interest and excitement? Now what's more thrilling—in the lines of business, I mean—than putting over some big, spectacular, sensational story, a scoop, let's say, before any reporter on any rival paper has a chance at it?"

"Nothing I can think of," Marcia agreed. And a moment later, in the train: "You have a reputation for scoops, haven't you, old thing? Unless my memory's off, I heard another of our reporters, Ben Hill, I believe it was, say that last year you collected more scoop bonuses than anybody on the *Courier*. Is that correct, though? I've always meant to ask you."

"I guess it is," Pat admitted modestly, "but even if the *Courier* didn't pay bonuses for scoops, I'd go after 'em just the same. That's the kind of reporting guy I am, always out to grab news that is news. It offers such unparalleled opportunity for adventure."

"And without adventure you wouldn't want to live, would you, Pat?"

"Without adventure—and without you—life would be a very tame affair, Marcia. Entirely too tame for yours truly."

Marcia wondered what her life would be without him. And with him—what would it be?

During the long subway ride she continued to wonder.

CHAPTER XIII

MARCIA'S DECISION

STROLLING from the 242nd Street station into the park, through clumps of trees all gorgeously tinted with red, gold-and-brown autumn leaves, Pat said:

"Like the old park, do you?"

"Like it! I love it. But, will you believe it, in the two years I've been in New York, this is only the second time I've ever set foot in Van Cortlandt Park."

"Really? I can't even count the times I've roamed these woods. To tell the truth, coming out here is a habit of mine and I know my way about perfectly. Bet you can't guess where I'm leading you, though."

"No, I can't. Where?"

"To a huge oak about a mile away. Thought we'd park under it. Eat under it, too, whenever you're hungry."

"That won't be soon. I'd just swallowed my breakfast when you surprised me with your ten o'clock pop-call."

"Then," suggested Pat, swinging her across a creek which they'd just come upon, "we'll prop ourselves

against the giant oak and talk till time to dive into the lunch box. We'll have plenty to say to each other, too, won't we, Miss Cuteness? For along with a lot of less important things we'll have the most fascinating subject in the world to keep us going—love, romance, marriage! There, I warned you that I was in a raving mood, didn't I?"

Pat gestured backward at the stream they'd just crossed and forward toward a thicket of trees, oaks, maples, elms, and asked: "Could you ever imagine a more ideal place for raving? Isn't this park a romantic setting for the plighting of a troth? All of which I thought about before I breezed in on you with my picnicking idea. But here we are at the oak I was telling you about. *Some* tree, isn't it?"

"A regular giant, the biggest, tallest tree I ever saw," replied Marcia, watching Pat unburden himself of the many-sectioned Sunday paper and the lunch box before spreading out her coat under a great overhanging bough.

"A nice shady nook for our spend-the-day-party, eh! And aren't we going to have a happy, peaceful Sunday here—away from New York, from people, from all city distractions? Isn't it wonderful?"

"It certainly is serene and beautiful, and we seem to have the park to ourselves, don't we?"

"This end of it, anyhow. But, sit down, Marcia.

You'll find the trunk of this tree a fairly comfortable chair back, I hope."

"It's grand." Marcia had seated herself and was reaching toward the paper.

"Which part do you want?" inquired Pat.

"The news section; the part with your stuff in it. That story about the big holdup in Wall Street yesterday ought to be a hot one."

"It's exciting enough, that's sure. But here's the paper. Read the story yourself and tell me what you think of it."

Finishing the account of the robbery, Marcia handed the paper back to Pat with the compliment: "Nobody on the *Courier* could've written that as well as you have. You deserve to be called our star reporter all right. You also deserve a raise in salary, I think."

"That's what Cas told me yesterday. What's more, he said he was going to see that I get one next month."

"Swell!" said Marcia enthusiastically.

"Isn't it? And I already know what I'm going to do with that extra cash. Spend it, every nickel of it, on the prettiest red-headed girl in New York. That was what I was planning while Cas was spilling the good news. Yeah, I intend to keep this little redhead in flowers and buy her all kinds of nice things."

Marcia contrived a smile both grateful and reprov-
ing. "That's awfully dear of you, Pat, but it's too
much, truly it is," she admonished. "I want you to
cut out some of this extravagance so far as I'm con-
cerned. We don't have to go to the expensive eating
places we're always going to, and you don't have to
send me orchids three and four times a week."

Pat grinned and threw his arm about her shoulder.
"I know that, beautiful. But I want to do it, see?
So now will you stop fussing? After we're married
—if you do me the honor *to* marry me—we can fight
over finances. Or better still, I'll let you keep the
family budget. Then there won't be any fighting.
Meanwhile, will you lay off protesting about the
money I spend on you?"

"I might as well lay off," replied Marcia, "for all
the good it does. You have your own notions,
haven't you Pat? And boy, how you *do* hold to 'em!"

"You bet I hold to 'em—that is, to my notions
about you. But say," with a glance at his watch and
another at the lunch box, "did you know it was nearly
an hour past your usual lunch time? Even allowing
for your late Sunday breakfast, you must be hungry
now."

"I'm not, though. Not a bit, and I believe I'm just
going to have to walk up an appetite. Oh"—as
gurglings from the creek reached her ear—"I'll tell
you what I'd rather do than anything—wade.

Wouldn't that be fun? Wading is a childhood complex I've never outgrown. Funny, isn't it?"

"I don't find it so, since I have the same complex and the same desire as you, and I'm nine years older than you are. With this side of the oak for your dressing room and the other side for mine, we can easily change into our wading costumes, can't we?"

"Righto!"

"Ready?" called out Pat.

"Ready," called back Marcia.

And with all the sprightliness of wood nymphs they made for the beckoning water.

Wading up and down stream like picnicking children, mixing their laughter with the ripples of the water, Marcia knew that as a playmate Pat Sartwell could never be excelled. His enthusiasm, his carefreeness and the whole-hearted way with which he'd thrown himself into even this simplest of pleasures were so refreshing, so contagious, that for the time being she was nearly as happy as Pat, because during those mirthful, playful moments she'd almost forgotten Nelson. And the bliss, the relief of that near-forgetting!

But the respite was of cruelly short duration. It ended that same afternoon, about three hours after they'd finished their picnicking when Pat, again placing his arm about Marcia's shoulder as they sat propped against the mammoth oak, said:

"I can't tell you what this Sunday has meant to me, sweetness. In all my young life, I've never had such a grand outing. You've been—well, just a precious companion and if you can get your own consent to give me that romantic break I'm always begging for, I'll consider myself the luckiest fellow in the world. You *are* going to give it to me, too, aren't you, Marcia dear?"

"I'd give it to you in a minute, Pat, if I just weren't afraid——"

"What are you afraid of, sweetheart?" His voice was imploringly tender.

"Of piling more matrimonial trouble on your head. We're at the same old impasse, I know, and while I appreciate your affection——"

"Affection! Don't ever call my feeling for you mere affection, baby. It's worship."

So *he* worshiped her; she worshiped Nelson; and Nelson worshiped Louise Stovall. That was tragedy for her, Marcia thought, and maybe for Pat, too!

Time was ticking away and in just a little while night would be casting its shadows among the park trees. Then she and her impatient reporter-suitor would start back home. But before they took the train Pat must have his "definite answer," the one word from her lips, which would settle their matrimonial futures, at least so far as they, individually, were concerned.

That one word, should it have three letters or two? Should it be "Yes," or should it be "No?"

Pat, following her pensive eyes to the rounded toes of her tan-and-white sports shoes, said:

"If it's fear of piling matrimonial trouble on my head that is making it so difficult for you to decide, please forget it. Put it out of your mind, for I'm willing and eager to take all the chances, *all* the responsibility."

There she was wavering again! But every time she tried to picture herself as Pat's wife, memories of Nelson, of his carrying her down the long hospital ramp in his arms, of his embraces, his love declarations, surged through her mind.

Marcia felt Pat's eyes upon her. That was why she looked away, at the creek, at fallen leaves which late afternoon breezes were whipping about. Reaching this all-important decision was an ordeal. But after moments of struggle, intensified by those recollections of Nelson, Marcia's decision was reached and she knew the greatest ordeal would be that of facing Pat and telling him that her answer was—"No."

But just as she was about to speak that fateful word two of the eddying leaves blew into Marcia's lap, rustling against her corded-silk sports skirt and distracting her attention momentarily. With a flirt-

ing motion of the hand she brushed the leaves off and they settled on the rotogravure section of the *Courier* which lay two or three feet away and which, for some reason or other, neither she nor Pat had unfolded.

Bending over, she picked up the leaves and then saw something that made her go cold all over. For she found that the leaves had covered a large photograph of Louise Stovall, who, according to the legend underneath, would "marry Nelson Trawick soon after his return from Leningrad, in November."

But why, she demanded of herself, had she felt so shocked at sight of the announcement? Hadn't she known all along that this wedding would take place sometime? Still, to realize that it was so imminent—only a few weeks hence—in November! How strange and how awesome, though, that her eye should have fallen upon the picture and the words beneath just when her lips were about to frame that definite "No."

Pat, curious as to Marcia's prolonged silence, gazed over her shoulder at the paper and asked: "What are you looking at honey? That picture of Nelson Trawick's fiancée?"

Marcia, nodding, passed him the paper and wanted to know if he considered the photograph a good likeness. "You had a close-up of Louise Stovall the night you interviewed Mr.—Mr. Trawick," she re-

mind. "I saw her only from a distance. She was on the deck of the *Europa* and I was on the pier, remember, when you pointed her out to me?"

Pat studied the picture a second before replying: "No, I wouldn't say this is *such* a good likeness. It's too flattering. Now from the photograph you'd call the girl a beauty, wouldn't you?"

"I certainly would."

"Well, she isn't a beauty—in life. Not to me at least. Maybe I'm hard to please, though; maybe I'm spoiled because *my* sweetheart's such a superlative beauty. Yeah, baby"—again gazing at the photograph and then at Marcia—"compared with you, this kid Nelson Trawick's going to marry is just a wet smack. But I suppose to him she's the loveliest thing alive. Otherwise why would he be marrying her?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking. To him she must be the loveliest thing alive. The loveliest thing alive——" Marcia's voice trailed off on the wind and she at last let go the autumn leaves she'd been unconsciously clutching in her hand.

Pat gazed at the sinking sun. "Whenever you want to push along, you'll tell me?" he said. "You're a great little picnicker. Still, I don't want to keep you out too late. No, I want to take the very best care of you always, to look out for you in every possible way."

Marcia's glance fell once more on Louise Stovall's photograph and with her eyes glued on it, she replied: "Because I'm so sure you mean what you've just said, Pat, I'm going to give you the opportunity to continue looking out for me as long as we live. I've made up my mind to—to marry you."

"Darling! You darling!" Pat's arm slipped from her shoulder to her waist and there he kept it till the moon, a full harvest moon, rose over the big oak and lighted the park with its soft, silver radiance.

Feeling his exultation, his ecstasy, Marcia experienced a sad kind of joy—the infinite satisfaction of giving happiness to another. A happiness she couldn't quite share.

"This is a glorious ending to a glorious day!" enthused Pat, pulling her up by the hands when she finally expressed a desire to go. "Shall we take the paper? I know you haven't read it all."

"I've read all I wanted to read." And, thinking of the announcement which had given her such a jolt, Marcia added to herself, "And much, much more."

Yet supposing she hadn't seen the announcement, would Pat Sartwell be thrilling over the glorious ending to a glorious day?

And from her own point of view, now that she was definitely committed by a promise, wouldn't it be much more pleasant going through the years to come as

Pat's beloved wife than going through them unloved—and alone?

All the way back home Marcia tried to accustom herself to the idea of being engaged to the *Courier's* brilliant reporter with the twinkling eyes and the flashing teeth, who, sitting there beside her in the subway, looked so beamingly, gratefully happy.

CHAPTER XIV

THE INTERNATIONAL CROOK

EVERY night Marcia and Pat had a dinner date. They generally knocked off work at the same time, too, leaving the city room together. But one Saturday afternoon Pat went out after a story which detained him till long after the usual quitting hour. So Marcia wrote a note telling him where he could find her; then she went home. She'd just opened the hall door when the phone rang.

The call was Pat's, as she guessed before lifting up the receiver. He said:

"Hello, sweetness, got all snagged up and couldn't make it back to the *Courier*, but at last I'm free for the evening, and can you meet me at the Sign of the Dragon in half an hour? It's that new Oriental restaurant in the Village: the one I was telling you about yesterday. If you'd rather go somewhere else, however, just say so."

"No, no, I'd like the Sign of the Dragon; I'm curious to see what it's like."

"O. K., I'll be waiting for you inside. Think I'd better grab a table as soon as possible, for from all I hear the place is mighty popular and fills up early."

It was at a table that Marcia found him, too, cornered off with a man, dark-haired, hazel-eyed and rather thickset, whom Pat introduced as "Arthur Benson, a boyhood friend from Philadelphia."

"Stay and eat with us, won't you, Art?" Pat invited, after a few pleasantries had been exchanged. "We'll both be tickled to have you."

"We certainly will," Marcia confirmed.

Even so, Benson smilingly declined the invitation, saying: "That's swell of you and I appreciate your kindness a lot, but to-night I can't have dinner with you, much as I'd like to, because of the business we just talked about, Pat. Awfully glad I bumped into you here, though, old man; believe our meeting will be a good break for you and for the *Courier*. It's always my pleasure to do a good friend a good turn."

With which Benson bowed to Marcia and crossed the room to a far-away table. It wasn't so far away, however, that she couldn't see him as he sat down and, watching him curiously, she asked:

"What did your boy friend mean when he said he figured your meeting here to-night would be a good break for you and for the *Courier*, and that it was always his pleasure to do a good friend a good turn? Unless, of course," smiling interrogatively, "I'm being too inquisitive; unless you two have some secret you don't want to let me in on?"

Pat waved aside the swarthy-skinned waiter in a black-satin coolie coat, embroidered in glittery, snaky design, who'd come shuffling up for their order, and whispered:

"We *have* a secret, Art and I, that's true. A deep, dark one. But since I choose to let you in on all my secrets, here goes! Arthur Benson's a detective, in the secret service department of the United States government, and he's here to watch Tom Elting——"

"Tom Elting?" Marcia was all animation now. "Who's he?"

"That sporty-looking guy parked seven or eight tables away from Art; the one wearing the monocle."

Marcia spotted Elting instantly and inquired: "Why is Benson watching him? What has he done?"

"Plenty to make him worth watching. He's an international crook, Art was just telling me—a circulator of counterfeit money abroad and a gem thief. Three years ago he robbed a rich London dowager—fooled her to a fare-you-well with his love-making, then stole a pile of her jewels. For some reason or other, through a technicality in the law, Arthur thinks, the bird escaped conviction. But after Art nabs him, and that won't be so long, I'm thinking, he'll find out what it means to have the toils of the old U. S. A. law tighten around him."

"You seem to be pretty sure that Elting is up to

something that the United States government can send him up for, aren't you?" asked Marcia. "But maybe he's as slick as Mr. Benson and will make a safe get-away."

"That could happen," said Pat. "But I'll bet my money on Art Benson. I know his record. Besides, he has too much dope on Elting and too many good clues to fall down on this job."

"He has?"

"I'll say he has. Why, he trailed the sheik—Elting has a reputation as a sheik as well as a crook—from his uptown hotel suite to this place. He is in hopes that Elting will go from here to the place where he has the presses and other paraphernalia for turning out counterfeit money.

"But, look, honey! There goes Elting, now! He's leaving the restaurant!"

"And," exclaimed Marcia, "your friend Benson is getting up from his table to continue his stalking! Gee, Pat, when I stepped into the Sign of the Dragon a few minutes ago I didn't dream I was stepping into all this excitement at one and the same time; that I'd meet a government sleuth on the trail of an international crook!"

"Guess you didn't. It was all one big surprise to me, too. But what Art meant when he spoke of a good break was that he's going to tip me off to the

arrest, see? Before any other reporter gets wise to it."

"And that'll mean one more big scoop for you?"

"Righto, but the more the merrier, for my little bride-to-be, and we can use all the scoop-bonus money that comes our way, can't we, especially on our honeymoon? I'm already beginning to plan for it."

Their honeymoon! Pat had begun to plan for it—and she hadn't even thought about it! Of their marriage she'd thought, of course, many times, but as for a wedding trip, strangely enough, the idea hadn't so much as occurred to her. No use to blurt that out to him, however, and throw a damper over his enthusiasm and over their entire evening. So, laughing, Marcia replied:

"With all *your* extravagant notions, I imagine we can always use every dollar you can get your hands on."

"My main trouble," said Pat, mock-seriously, "will be getting my hands on many of our dollars after *you* get control of the family budget."

"As if I could ever be stingy!"

"Never stingy, loveliness, just unselfish. Too unselfish to permit me to buy you presents every day as I'd always wanted to do, whether we could exactly afford it or not. But I'll mind you about the money—after we're married—precisely as I promised that

day in the park when you promised to let me look out for you as long as we live."

"You'd better!" As Pat signaled back the waiter he'd waved away and ordered the chow mein, rice wine and other things that make up the menu of a perfect Chinese dinner.

CHAPTER XV

MARCIA MEETS HER RIVAL

THE next few days Marcia was kept unusually busy, flitting here, there, everywhere over New York, it seemed, on various news and feature stories. But the assignment that promised the biggest thrill of all was the interview she was sent to get from Helen de Forrest, the famous American girl flyer who had completed the first nonstop solo flight from Cherbourg to New York ever made by man or woman.

Pepped up and brimful of curiosity, Marcia rushed breathlessly into the elevator of the fashionable Savoya Hotel where the aviatrix was living. And just as breathlessly she ran down the twelfth-floor corridor leading to the de luxe apartment occupied by the flyer, who turned out to be a mere slip of a girl and as gracious and charming as she was daring.

So entertaining, too, was Helen de Forrest with her detailed account of the amazing East-to-West hop that three quarters of an hour had sped away before Marcia even thought of time. Suddenly reminded of it, however, by an accidental glance at a desk clock, she snatched up her gloves and said:

"Goodness gracious, I had no idea it was so late! You and your story so entranced me, Miss de Forrest, that you'll just have to blame yourself and pardon me for overstaying my welcome."

"But you haven't overstayed your welcome. I've had just as good a time as you have and that makes us even, doesn't it?"

"If all celebrities were like you," complimented Marcia, "giving up my job would be even harder than I know it is going to be——"

"Oh, you've decided to give up your job? When?" broke in the girl flyer, who was standing at the door beside Marcia. "And why? To get married, I'll bet."

"To get married, yes; but just when I'll resign I can't say. That's indefinite. I love newspaper work, you see."

"No doubt, and I can readily understand why, but no career can ever take the place of marriage. I certainly feel that way about mine."

"You do!"

"Indeed, I do, though flying's always been the most marvelous fun and many's the thrill I've gotten out of it, particularly out of this transatlantic hop I've just made. I'd been dreaming about it, preparing for it for two whole years. But with it now behind me, the next great event in my life will be a wedding—my own wedding—and, if you ask me, that will be the greatest event of all. It should be the greatest in

any woman's life, no matter who or what she is—if she's really and truly feminine."

Leaving Miss de Forrest, Marcia started down the hallway, her thoughts all on the famous aviatrix, her ocean hop; her ideas about marriage. But she hadn't gotten far before something else captured her attention; the spectacle of a man, apparently in flight, darting through a door, across the corridor, beyond the elevator and out of sight. And behind him, through the same door, darted a woman—or perhaps it was a girl, from a distance it was impossible to tell—in a pale blue dress. She was also instantly lost to view.

Nevertheless, her cry, shrill and feminine: "You can't treat me like this and get away with it!" traveled down the hall.

Marcia, figuring the woman might be in distress and in need of help, dashed wildly toward the elevator. Before she reached it, however, she heard the demand: "Give me back my diamonds, you thief, or I'll have you arrested!"

What was going on here, in the Savoya? Had a robbery been committed? It certainly would seem so.

Cutting around the elevator shaft, Marcia beheld, four or five steps down the stairway, the wearer of the light blue dress, whose face was turned away from her and toward a man—evidently the person at whom she'd been screaming. He was on the stairway, several steps below her.

"Give me back my jewels!" This second demand was shriller and more peremptory than the first. "If you don't hand them over this very instant, Tom Elting, I'll go back to your suite and phone the doorman to hold you in the foyer till the police can come and get you!"

Tom Elting, the international crook whom Art Benson, the government detective, had trailed from the Sign of the Dragon, had undoubtedly pulled off another jewel robbery! Marcia recalled that Pat had said Elting lived in an uptown hotel. Undoubtedly it was the Savoya.

"Try phoning over a cut wire!" Elting's retort was a triumphant sneer. "And," he went on, "wouldn't you be in a pretty fix if you reported the—er—loss of your diamonds to the doorman? Do you think your swell boy friend, Nelson Trawick, would marry you if it gets into the papers that you've been to my rooms? It certainly will get into them, too, if you play the fool and have me arrested."

Nelson Trawick! Then the girl with her back turned, the girl Tom Elting had robbed was Louise Stovall! And she, while betrothed to Nelson, had gone to another man's apartment!

Marcia, too shocked to move or to speak, stood as if dazed until Elting, suddenly spying her at the head of the stairs above Louise, resumed his flight down the steps.

Louise continued to gaze down the empty stairway, turning over in her mind all Elting had just said.

Of course, he knew when stripping her of the diamonds that he *could* get away with the robbery; that she would be in no position to report him to the police; that she wouldn't *dare* report him. Yet none of that had occurred to her until he'd made her see her predicament. But why was she lingering there on the stairs? Some one might come along.

She whirled around and, beholding Marcia, exclaimed: "You—you heard?"

"Every word! He, Tom Elting, the jewel thief, stole your diamonds!"

"And you know him?"

"By sight and reputation, yes. He's an international crook."

"An international crook!" Louise caught at the stair railing, gripped it and cried out hysterically: "Oh, I must get out of this hotel at once or there'll be a horrible scandal—one that will ruin me, my father and mother! My hat, my coat—they're in there!" She gestured toward the door through which she'd run after Elting.

"Then the only thing to do is to go back and get them," advised Marcia.

Louise started up the steps with a rush, only to discover at her very first step that the heel of her left slipper was missing. "I must've wrenched the

heel off my pump," she said, "tearing down the stairs."

"I see it there against the wall, on the second stair." Marcia stooped down and, picking up the heel, added: "If you don't hurry out of this hotel you certainly may be involved in a scandal. One you'll never be able to live down."

Looking at Elting's door with stark terror in her eyes, Louise cried: "I can't—I simply cannot go back into that apartment alone, now. Won't you please, please go with me?"

Marcia went and in the living room on a mahogany table, while Louise was putting on her hat and coat, she noticed two trays of cocktail glasses, recently used, and two silver ash trays cluttered with cigarette butts. So, visiting, drinking and smoking had preceded the robbery! It was easy enough to visualize the whole procedure.

Clutching Marcia's arm and limping through the foyer on her right foot, Louise said in a panicky voice: "How will I ever explain to Gertie—that's my mother—about the loss of my diamonds? Also, about the missing slipper heel if she should happen to see that it's missing?"

"Did you lose many diamonds?" Marcia asked at the curb where they waited for a cab.

"I should say! Two flexible diamond bracelets, a very expensive pin and two rings—one my engage-

ment ring. Isn't it terrible? Nothing I could ever do to get them back, either, is there? I mean without risking notoriety and disgrace?"

"Nothing that I know of," replied Marcia. "You can easily have the torn-off heel put back on your pump, however, at a shoe-repair shop. I still have it here in my hand, you see?"

"I see, but I've never in my life been to a shoe-repair shop; I wouldn't know how to act in one, so you'll go with me, won't you? My nerves are all jittery and I need you. You couldn't refuse me," tearfully, "you've been such an angel, and here comes a cab!"

Marcia continued being "an angel." Why, she did not know. She only knew that impulse and the strangeness of the circumstances seemed to be forcing her along. So she taxied with Louise to a shoe-repair place in Times Square.

A uniformed attendant ushered them to two empty, side-by-side, waist-high booths in a long row of occupied ones, took Louise's left pump and the wrenched-off heel, then disappeared.

There were more and more whispered lamentations over the stolen jewels, wailings that Marcia scarcely heard, not because they were whispered, but because she was thinking——

Thinking: "What a whale of a story I stumbled into at the Savoya! A diamond robbery pulled off by

an international crook who's now being trailed by a secret service agent! The scoop I *could* and *should* write for my paper! A story that would not only prove ruinous to this girl jabbering away here at my elbow, but which might also prevent her marriage to Nelson Trawick, the man I love to the point of madness this very minute!

"And if," Marcia speculated further, "that wedding should not take place, then Nelson and I may meet again sometime, somewhere!"

"It's taking that cobbler, or whatever you call him, all day to tack on my heel, isn't it?" Louise complained. "Aren't you tired of sitting in this hot, stuffy, leather-smelling place?"

"I hadn't thought about it being hot, stuffy or leather smelling," Marcia replied. "My mind was on other things. But you'll have your shoe soon and then we can push on."

"Heaven knows, I hope so! Before we separate, though, I want to thank you for all you've done for me and to show my appreciation I'd like to do something for you in return. I know what I *can* do, too: send you an invitation to my wedding if you'll give me your name and address!"

An invitation to Louise Stovall's wedding! Could anything ever be more unwelcome, more heart racking? "I thank you for thinking about it," Marcia said, "but please don't bother to send the invitation."

"Why not? It's going to be a gorgeous wedding, a very, very fancy one on Fifth Avenue."

"No doubt. Even so, an invitation wouldn't do me any good. I couldn't get off to go to the marriage."

"You mean you work?"

"I do. I'm a reporter."

"A reporter!" Louise was aghast—and furious. From the polite and very grateful person she'd just appeared to be, she became all at once the most impolite ingrate one could ever imagine.

"So you're just a snooping reporter," she accused in a veritable frenzy of temper, "out to line up a lot of information to pack into some scandalous story about me and my—my misfortune. I'll bet you even followed me into the Savoya; I'll bet you've been following me there all along."

"*All along!*" What a confession! It had just slipped out, of course, in that moment of rage, but *what* a confession!

Indignantly Marcia explained her purpose in going to the hotel. Then, controlling as best she could her own resentment, her own temper which had never been so blazingly active, she rose and said in a voice that trembled only slightly:

"I'd intended to stay with you till your shoe was fixed. But since you've been so ungrateful and so idiotic as to insult me—for of course, if I chose, I could show you up in your true colors on the front

page of the *Courier*—I'll leave you *now* and go on about my own business."

Louise, alarmed, began to grovel. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" she sobbed. "You're perfectly right. I was an idiot to speak as I did, but I just went all to pieces when you told me you were a reporter. I was so frightened, I lost my head. Please forgive me. And don't go now," pulling Marcia back by the sleeve, "without giving me your word that you won't write anything about my being in Tom Elting's suite. You're just a girl, too. Can't you imagine yourself in my position, and have pity?"

Marcia thought of Nelson; of his and Louise's approaching marriage; of her own love for him and said: "No, I could never imagine myself getting into your position, going to that man's apartment. Not in a thousand years."

"Well, whether you can or not," weeping, "you *will* have pity on me, won't you? My mother's home ill, under the care of a trained nurse. Think what such a newspaper exposure would do to her, the poor dear!"

"And you went off and left a sick mother to keep a date with a crook!" exclaimed Marcia. "You amaze me more and more every minute."

"I didn't know Tom Elting was a crook," Louise offered in explanation. "In London he told me he was a wealthy globe-trotter. He looked and acted the

part so well; too, he had such a smooth, convincing line that I believed him."

"And," tightening her hold on Marcia's sleeve, "as for leaving my mother, she isn't *very* ill. She isn't even in bed to-day; she was downstairs walking around when I left. She's just extremely nervous because—because, well, because dad's brokerage business, usually so highly successful, has been going badly of late, and that's shot Gertie's nerves all to pieces; made her hysterical and if you should print a scandalous story about me, about my being mixed up with a crook, can't you see how that would aggravate her condition?"

As Marcia silently considered all that, Louise spoke again. "I'll give you money to spare us this humiliation; all I can possibly rake up."

"Money!" Marcia, her cheeks flaming resentfully, retorted: "You'd been offensive enough before, Louise Stovall, but this last insult, this offer to buy me off, to pay me *not* to print a story I have every right *to* print, is the last straw. If you knew anything about reporters, you'd know that a decent one could not be corrupted in the way you just tried to corrupt me."

"I meant no offense," said Louise, cringing. "You're the first reporter I've ever met, though, and I was absolutely desperate."

Marcia's eyes strayed toward the door as Louise,

devising another entreaty, continued self-pityingly: "I realized you had it in your power to ruin my family, to wreck my whole future and that of the man I'm to marry. You probably aren't aware of it, but he's returning next week from Russia on the *Carlsholm* and if he should learn of my visit to Tom Elting's apartment he would——"

"Would what? Refuse to marry you, as I heard Elting predict?"

"He m-might."

So this girl to whom Nelson was engaged had admitted that! What if Marcia *did* write the story and Nelson *should* refuse to marry Louise Stovall!

"But just supposing," Louise was saying, "my fiancé were to break off our engagement, as a result of a *Courier* exposé, his heart would have been broken in the meantime. He's always adored me, just worshiped the ground I walked on.

"Yes, he's a one-girl man, if that can give you any better idea of the sort of chap he is. So, for his sake, if not for mine and dad's and Gertie's, won't you have mercy? Would you, just for one single story, be willing to make a fine, upright, noble young fellow miserable for life? Would you want that on your conscience?"

Louise wept into her handkerchief at Marcia, pondering that last appeal, asked herself whether or not she could ever really have another peaceful

moment if she had the slightest reason for believing she'd done something to make Nelson Trawick's life miserable. Wouldn't that be too much of a burden on her conscience? Of course, her own life—except for diverting moments, here and there, with Pat—would probably be miserable. Quite utterly so. Still, that was her own, not Nelson's.

The uniformed attendant came back, at last, apologizing: "Sorry to have kept you waiting, lady, but there were several customers ahead of you. And here's your shoe, with the ticket. Pay at the desk."

"All right." Louise took the ticket and poked her foot into the pump.

"I'm leaving you now, for a fact," announced Marcia wearily. The excitement, the ordeal she'd passed through had taxed her terribly.

"And you *will* forgive me—and spare me?" Louise begged. "You *will* have mercy and pity on me?"

"I've decided *not* to write the story."

"Oh, you're marvelous, you're wonderful!"

"Neither marvelous nor wonderful," replied Marcia with a melancholy smile. "Just weak."

"Why weak, I don't understand."

"You wouldn't, even if I told you. *You* couldn't."

A dash through the exit, a trip downtown on the roaring, clanging "L" and Marcia was back in the *Courier's* city room, rushing out copy on the Helen de Forrest interview.

CHAPTER XVI

A GIRL'S SACRIFICE

ACROSS the city room of the *Courier*, Ben Hill called to Marcia. "Telephone, Marcia!" Then, as she came over to his desk, he handed her the receiver and said: "It's that lucky dog, Pat Sartwell."

"Why lucky, Ben?"

"Because he's won you away from all the rest of us poor, envious reporters."

Marcia smiled and spoke into the telephone mouth-piece.

"Hey, old thing! What's the good news, if any?"

"Good news!" Pat was hilarious, the ring in his voice told that. "Just get this earful, baby! I'm at the Savoya, rounding up a front-page story—one of the knock-out scoops of the year."

"At the Savoya!" The receiver all but fell from Marcia's hand. Could he be rounding up the same story she'd promised Louise Stovall not to write only a few hours before, the story of the diamond robbery?

"Yeah, at the Savoya," Pat confirmed, "where I'll have to stick around for a while. Got to see an elevator boy who's out now but who's expected back

before long. That's why I phoned. It's nearly five o'clock and I wanted to ask you to wait for me in the city room. You won't mind, will you honey?"

"No, no, of course not." Marcia's tone was so low she had to repeat her answer.

' She returned to her desk, slowly, her cheeks white as snow and her whole body quivering. To think, *she'd* passed up that big scoop only to have the *Courier's* real scoop-getter go out after it!

In an empty city room, Pat found her still at her desk. Or rather, sitting on top of it, her hands clasped behind her back and her eyes gazing anxiously into space.

"Why, what's the matter with my little sweetheart?" he asked. "She looks so dreadfully unhappy about something. Did I keep you waiting here too long?"

"I had begun to get awfully impatient," Marcia confessed. "Tell me all about your knock-out scoop."

He sat beside her on the desk. "There, now I can talk. Remember my friend, Art Benson, the government detective? Well, he's nabbed the man he was trailing—the fellow with the monocle—that Tom Elting I pointed out to you in the Sign of the Dragon restaurant. I told you Arthur would get the crook, didn't I?"

"You did, and Elting is now under arrest?"

"Is he? I'll say he is! I talked to him this afternoon in the hoosegow."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing much. To me, anyhow. In fact, on learning I was a reporter he shut up like a clam. But the cock-and-bull story he'd told to the officers before I saw him, when they 'frisked' him and found some thousands of dollars' worth of diamonds in his pocket, was enough to send me humping to the Savoya. And *was* that a swell lead?"

"Before you got that lead, though," concluded Marcia, "you must've received a tip from Art Benson that sent you humping to the jail."

"Right. Art had been camping on this bird's trail for some time, as I told you. Well, to-day he and a couple of sleuths followed Elting from the Savoya Hotel to a dilapidated old house up beyond the Fifty-ninth Street bridge. And in that old house Arthur and his assistants found presses and all other essential equipment for turning out bogus money. Then, after the arrest was made, Art phoned me and I beat it to th hoosegow.

"And"—continued Pat, pausing a moment for breath—"from the jail I beat it to the Savoya, for, going back to that cock-and-bull story, how do you suppose Elting had accounted for the diamonds? He's said some girl in straitened circumstances had given them to him to dispose of for her. Yes, that

was his explanation. Did you ever hear of anything so flimsy, so incredible?"

Marcia gasped as she recalled the conversation of Tom Elting and Louise Stovall on the hotel stairway. But Pat did not notice the gasp and he went on excitedly:

"Luckily, I recognized a good lead when I saw one, so I hot-footed it to the Savoya to line up all the dope I could on Elting. And the stuff I pried out of an elevator boy there!"

"What *did* you pry out of him?" Pat's words were coming fast, but not fast enough for Marcia.

"This—that the foxy-looking sheik had a blonde sweetie who visited him from time to time in his apartment; that she was there to-day. The boy I talked with took her up in his car, and while he didn't take her down, he saw her limping through the hotel foyer minus a heel from one of her slippers, just a few minutes after Elting had gone out to the street. I felt sure he had her jewels in his pocket. Still, to be doubly sure, I've decided to locate the blonde. And that I intend to do to-night. Meanwhile, I thought we'd have a quick dinner some where, for you must be starved, aren't you?"

"Far from it," denied Marcia, and hoping and praying her voice wasn't really trembling, that she only imagined it was, she went on: "Before we leave this city room, Pat, I want you to make me a promise. I

want you to grant me the biggest kind of favor, will you?"

"*Will* I? Don't be silly. Have I ever refused you anything? Shoot!"

"I don't—I don't want you even to try to find that blonde who went to Tom Elting's suite, and I want you to lay off the diamond robbery?"

Pat, too startled, too taken aback to answer, sat staring at Marcia in puzzled amazement, then exclaimed:

"Why, darling, I don't get you at all! You certainly can't be serious; you can't possibly mean what you've just said. After the headwork *and* footwork I've done on this story which has all sorts of possibilities from a news angle, I'd be a fool to ditch it. A downright fool, do you hear me?"

"Besides, you know about the *Courier's* scoop bonuses. Wouldn't one of 'em come in handy on our honeymoon to Havana or Bermuda or wherever you choose to go?"

"I'd rather not go on a honeymoon; I'd rather stay right here in New York; I'd rather give up anything, everything, than have you find that blonde and quiz her about the diamonds taken from Tom Elting's pocket."

As exasperated as he was mystified, Pat asked: "Are you crazy—or what?"

"Crazy, I guess. Quite crazy, in a way. But," in a demanding tone, "will you lay off? Or won't you?"

Pat, always so easy-going, obliging and ready to please, replied in a voice impatient and decisive:

"I certainly won't. For even if I did agree to grant you a favor, I had no idea you'd spring this absurdly unreasonable request on me. What has come over you, anyway?"

Marcia, who'd managed, somehow, to assume a certain poise, even though her voice had quaked slightly, wondered how much longer she could maintain it. After all, she was only a girl. A girl in love with a man whose life happiness was being threatened, for if Nelson did adore his fiancée, wouldn't it break his heart if Pat wrote that scoop?

And with her own heart broken for so long, who could know better than she what that would mean? Days and nights, nights and days of thinking, regretting, longing, trying to fathom the whys and wherefores of a cruel Destiny which seemed to bring people joys, thrills and hopes only to snatch them away ruthlessly and forever.

Yes, if Pat persisted in carrying out his purpose, if he located the blonde, wrote and turned in the scoop, as he had a perfect right to do, then all New York—and Nelson Trawick—would know about Louise Stovall's visits to the Savoya suite of the international crook.

Nelson's future was the most important consideration right now, and that future was endangered.

But what could she expect? That Pat Sartwell would abandon, even for her, a story boasting all the sensational aspects of this one? A story that promised front-page news for days and days. For should Pat find Louise Stovall, as undoubtedly he would, if he really set out *to* find her, wouldn't he make the very most, journalistically, of her clandestine rendezvous with Tom Elting?

Why give up, however, why not fight on and on to keep report of Louise's visits to the Savoya out of the *Courier*? Marcia knew her love for Nelson would make her fight.

"Pat," she said, "you've never refused me anything, as you reminded me a moment ago. Please, please don't refuse me this favor. I realize I'm asking a lot and yet——"

"Yet what? If you'd only explain yourself! You just keep on begging me to kill the best scoop I've run into in months, without offering any reason. I'd be a swell reporter, I would, to give in to you, *even* to you. And for the last time, Marcia, I'm not going to do it. Do you hear, I'm *not* going to do it," he wound up with annoyed finality.

So she's fought and begged—and lost! Pat was adamant. Not only his words, but the steely, set look in his eyes proved it. How silly and presumptuous to

think she could have swerved him! Still, strangely enough, she'd counted on her power to do so.

"Will you tell me why you're being so persistent and mysterious, Marcia?" he inquired. "Are you trying to protect this blonde from notoriety for some reason or other? You must be."

"Y-e-s, I am," she admitted, "but," driven on by sudden inspiration and by a resolve that goaded her to the most desperate of measures, she continued, "if you just won't ask me any more questions and if you'll grant my request, no matter how absurdly unreasonable you may consider it, I'll—I'll do anything on earth you may wish. Anything!"

And her poise completely deserting her, she broke down and sobbed while waiting for Pat's answer.

He, moved by her tears, became tenderly considerate, wiped her eyes with his own handkerchief and pleaded: "There, there, baby, don't cry! I simply can't stand it. Now if I seemed stubborn and abrupt, if I was unyielding, it was because the thing you were urging me to do struck me as preposterous. But, honestly, did you really mean what you just said, that you'd do anything I might wish if I'd forget this Savoya scoop?"

"I did."

"All right, toss up your job and marry me right away and I'll forget the story. Is that a bargain?"

"It may turn out to be the worst one you ever

made," with a smile sadly triumphant, "but I accept your terms. Yes, I'll resign to-morrow, giving Cas the usual notice and——"

"At the end of two weeks it'll be wedding bells for us?" Pat broke in. "At the end of two weeks?"

"If you wish," gazing pensively out of the window.

"*If* I wish!" He kissed her elatedly and went on: "I should worry about a single front-page story, even a knock-out scoop, for there'll be lots, lots more of them in my young life, but never another Marcia!"

"I hope you'll always be plenty glad," she said, in a voice low-pitched and none too steady, "and not merely on your—on our—wedding day."

"I will, loveliness. I will," assured Pat as she sat there tensely, nervously dangling her feet over the side of the typewriter desk, wondering if any woman had ever waged a more determined fight to safeguard the happiness of the man she adored. Even his happiness with some one else—with the girl he'd chosen to marry.

CHAPTER XVII

TO INTERVIEW NELSON TRAWICK!

MARCIA, a week after resigning her position, sat before the dressing table fastening a filet about her hair: a shiny satin ribbon that matched the sea-foam gown she was wearing by request, for leaving the city room of the *Courier*, Pat had said:

"Doll up in that frock I'm so crazy about, the sea-foam creation, will you, honey, for the newspaper women's ball we're going to to-night at the Astor? In that you'll queen it over all the other girls. Not that you wouldn't do that, anyhow," he amended. "Still, I have a very particular weakness for that dress, and to humor me——"

"To humor you I'll wear it."

And now she had it on. Yes, her toilette was complete, even to the drop of perfume on her handkerchief, and there was nothing left to do except throw about her shoulders the silver lamé evening wrap as soon as Pat arrived, which should be any moment, and they'd be off to the dance.

But ten, fifteen minutes lagged by and he did not arrive. He who was always so punctual!

After half an hour Marcia dialed Pat's home phone number. Again and again. No answer. Without doubt something had happened. What was it? Restless and fidgety, she walked about in her apartment. Then the bell rang, jerkily, four or five times.

Rushing to the door, she beheld Pat, not in the expected tuxedo, but in a blue business suit and with a small traveling bag in his hand.

"Why—why——" she stammered in amazement, "you aren't going to the ball?"

He entered the foyer, put down his bag and replied in a voice shaking with emotion: "No, darling, I can't. Much as I hate to disappoint you, I just can't go. You see, while dressing to come here I got a long-distance call from Philadelphia."

"From Philadelphia? I hope nothing's wrong over there."

"There is, though. Something terribly wrong. Sara is ill, dangerously so. Laura—my former wife, you know—called up and told me."

"Sara, your little daughter, Pat? Oh, I'm so sorry. What's the trouble?"

"Appendicitis. She's about to undergo an operation which may or may not save her life. The poor baby, if she *should* die I'd never get over it and I'd never forgive myself, either!"

Marcia saw unshed tears in the nearly always

twinkling eyes and sympathetically grasping Pat's hand, she replied:

"I understand your anxiety, or course, but you can't help it because the little thing's sick."

"No, that's true. Yet," remorsefully, "I could've helped neglecting the child. And *how* I have neglected her! I haven't been to see Sara in over two months, and over the phone her mother said she'd been crying and begging for me. Crying her heart out. All of which made me feel doubly guilty."

"But you're doing all you can, Pat," consoled Marcia. "You are going to Philadelphia to be with the baby."

"Yes, I'm taking the first train out. It will leave the Pennsylvania Station"—he held up Marcia's arm directly under the light and calculated the time by her wrist watch—"in exactly eighteen minutes, and if I step lively I can make it."

"Then step lively."

At the end of the hall, just before reaching the elevator, Pat turned and waved good-by and Marcia, waving back, returned once more to her bedroom and began taking off the gorgeous dancing apparel.

Poor Pat, how unnerved and distressed he was! But no wonder, with his only child gravely ill and facing an operation! How lightly, carefreely he'd always taken the responsibility of fatherhood, his

divorce, everything else apparently—except his love for her!

Yet Sara's illness, his concern for her and his feeling of regret and remorse because of paternal neglect, had just revealed another side of his character; had shown that in trouble he was another person altogether. One who could be painfully contrite and conscience-smitten. Yes, this was a new Pat Sartwell to Marcia. A Pat Sartwell for whom she felt the deepest sympathy and a much, much greater admiration.

All during the evening and way, way into the night she worried about Sara; also, about the grief-stricken, self-reproaching Pat and even about Laura, the child's mother, whom Marcia had never seen. She had often wondered what sort of person Laura Sartwell was, She'd even gone so far as to ask Pat, but the most he'd ever said was:

"Oh, she's really quite nice in her way—attractive, a good sport and a much better mother than I am a father. There is really nothing I could say against her."

Marcia then had wanted to ascertain the reasons for the divorce. Pat's reticence to go into the whys and wherefores of the separation had shut off the question, so she knew almost no more about Laura now

than before. And soon she'd be this woman's successor as Pat's wife!

With all these thoughts surging through Marcia's mind, sleep was out of the question. Supposing Sara didn't survive the operation, would Pat ever be able to live down his remorse? Would he ever again be the happy, jovial companion she'd become really fond of in a friendly, appreciative way? And could she—no matter how much he might care about her—make him happy?

Tragedies, shocks, disappointments never left a person where they found him. Had she or her life ever been the same since she'd met, loved and lost Nelson Trawick? Though, on second thought, "lost" wasn't the right word, for she'd never really had his love. He'd only pretended to her that she had. So she'd just been disillusioned about him. That was all. Even so, had her disappointment and suffering been any the less because of that?

But the sadness of all this remembering! Fortunately, however, thanks to Pat, to his diverting influence, to the amusing times they'd had together, and more recently, to their engagement, with plans all made for their approaching marriage, she had had her respites of—of almost forgetting.

Exhausted, Marcia dragged herself out of bed and prepared a hurried breakfast which she ate no less hurriedly.

Then she began to dress. But what an effort to get ready to go to the *Courier* office! How heavy her head felt and how utterly unfit for work she was! Maybe, for once, she should phone Cas that she was "all in" and not able to report for duty. He could get along somehow without her.

Throwing herself across the bed, Marcia debated with herself whether to show up on the job or to stay home and rest. But could she really rest? Wouldn't she just keep on thinking and worrying the way she'd done all through the night? Besides, mightn't there already be a telegram at the *Courier* from Philadelphia—one reassuring or telling her the worst had happened?

Marcia bounded up, dressed quickly and got to her desk only a few minutes after the usual time. But on her desk there was no message. Now, why hadn't Pat wired? Had he been too overcome to do so? Well, till some word came she'd try to make herself believe that no news *was* good news.

But every time the phone rang, she felt her heart jump with terror, for mightn't it be Pat calling over long distance to inform her that the operation had been performed and that his little girl was dead?

Strange, she felt such concern over a child she'd never even laid eyes on. Yet not so strange when she would soon be married to the child's father, when she would soon be his companion for life in sorrow

as well as in joy. That is, if any joy was to be theirs. Everything seemed so black and unpromising now, so hopeless and depressing.

More or less occupied with work, assignments of one sort and another, Marcia remained on the job, waiting for a telegram or a phone call which did not come. What a day of suspense and tension and how disconsolate she felt at the end of it! And straightening out papers just before closing her desk, she decided that the very worst had happened and that Pat had been too stunned, too crushed, too grieved even to let her know.

"The cruel way life has of buffeting us about," she mused on her ride uptown in an overcrowded subway train. Of torturing us, too, at times almost beyond endurance, no matter who we are, whether worthy or unworthy, and regardless of what we do or fail to do.

"Or of torturing *most* of us," she qualified as she recalled her promise to marry Pat in two weeks, if he'd forget the big Savoya scoop he'd had his heart so set on writing—the exposure that would have ruined Louise Stovall, the whole Stovall family, in fact. There was a girl, miraculously spared, through the strangest combination of circumstances imaginable, from disgrace and all the lamentable consequences that would have followed upon it.

This undeserving girl who, with one man wor-

shipping the ground she walked on, according to her own statement, had been clandestinely meeting an international crook! If another reporter—a newspaper writer to whom Nelson Trawick's happiness was of no importance—had witnessed that incriminating hotel stairway scene, it would have been just too bad for Louise.

And if she, Marcia Reynolds, hadn't later on succeeded in dissuading Pat Sartwell from finding Louise and springing the scandalous story about her, her marriage to Nelson Trawick would probably never take place.

Yes, Nelson's fiancée was evidently one of the world's fortunate few, fated to get just about all the good breaks and next to none of the bad ones. The daughter of a rich man, she would soon be the wife of a famous architect who, never dreaming she was other than his ideal, would no doubt put her happiness above and beyond all other considerations. Wealth, love, everything desirable seemed to have been destined for Louise Stovall. Surely that was the only explanation of all her unmerited blessings.

Two mornings later, however, Marcia was forced to revise that conclusion. About Louise's security of wealth, at least. For standing at the city editor's desk awaiting an assignment, she heard Joe Treadwell, the paper's financial reporter, say:

"Just got word, Mr. Caswell, that another big Wall Street brokerage concern has gone under. Stovall & Company, on the verge of failure for the past few days, has closed its doors. The report is that Harvey Stovall, the president, is nearly cleaned out. Thought I'd better go after all the particulars, at once."

"Good idea, Joe." The middle-aged, keen-eyed editor adjusted his spectacles and went on: "That house dealt in foreign as well as domestic securities, didn't it? I remember quite a big flotation of South American bonds it put across not so long ago. So hop to it. Pump Harvey Stovall for all details of the failure. He's cagy, I understand. But make him talk. You know how to do that."

With the financial reporter gone, Caswell turned to Marcia and said:

"Now, young lady, I have what should be a very interesting job for you. You just heard my conversation with Joe Treadwell about the fold-up of Stovall & Company. Well, Harvey Stovall's prospective son-in-law, Nelson Trawick, the American architect who won that Soviet architectural prize a few months back and who later went to Leningrad to design some modern skyscrapers, is coming in on the *Carlsholm* this morning. The ship will reach Quarantine shortly, so I want you to go aboard and interview Trawick."

"You want *me* to interview Nelson Trawick?" As

a girl reporter she'd been sent out on all sorts of news gathering and interviewing missions, but this——

"Certainly, I want you to, why not? Pat generally does all our marine stuff, to be sure. He's still in Philadelphia, though, with a sick baby, as you're doubtless aware."

Marcia was very much aware that Pat was still in Philadelphia, as he'd finally phoned the night before to say Sara's condition was so precarious he dared not leave her and that he'd telegraph or telephone again just as soon as there was any chance one way or the other.

But Cas was continuing his instructions, unusually detailed and explicit for him, which she was only half hearing. The chain of events, the incomprehensible, unbelievable tangle of circumstances that was about to force her to board the incoming *Carlsholm* and interview Nelson Trawick!

"You know what to do, do you, Marcia?"

"I'm to interview this returning architect——"
But she couldn't go on, for in her bewildered distraction that was as much as she'd gotten from the detailed, explicit instructions.

"Naturally," retorted the city editor. "What are you going to ask him, though?"

"Why, why——"

"Marcia Reynolds, do you mean to say you've stood

there and let me talk myself blue in the face, without taking in what I was telling you? I never knew you to be like this before. But"—sighing exasperatedly—"now I'll have to repeat all I said. And this time, will you please give me your undivided attention?"

"I will, Mr. Caswell." She'd deserved that rebuke. Still, how impossible it had been to concentrate on those editorial directions!

"All right," Cas began once more, "I want you to find out what the Soviet is actually doing for women in Russia. There'll be a bunch of reporters from rival papers, firing away all sorts of questions at Trawick. But don't let them crowd you out or cramp your style, and be sure to get from the architect his opinion—backed up by the reasons for it—as to whether Russian women are faring better or worse under the present governmental régime. We've had some very conflicting reports on this point.

"So"—his abruptness all gone and even a suggestion of a smile on his face—"go to it, Marcia, and see what this young fellow has to say from his first-hand observations. And bring me back a front-page story, nothing else. Now run on like a good girl and don't dare disappoint me."

A front-page story! What an order, when she'd do well to get any kind of interview at all! Could she, in the presence of a flock of other reporters, manifest sufficient composure to question this man who'd car-

ried her to romantic heights never before scaled, only to plunge her into an abyss of sorrow right afterward? This man whose happiness *had* meant—and still mean—more to her than anything else in the world, as she'd proved to herself so recently?

"I'll do my best," Marcia assured Caswell, and went back to her desk for pencils and paper.

CHAPTER XVIII

LOVERS MEET AGAIN

OUT on Deck A of the *Carlsholm*, in a steamer chair, surrounded by reporters, all men as it happened, Marcia found Nelson. A timid, shrinking little figure in brown knitted sports suit and brown béret, Marcia took her stand behind the other journalists. And there she remained, hidden, trying to master enough self-control to face him. To face him and at the same time to conceal her emotions.

Could she really go through with this interview? Why not just return to the *Courier* and tell Caswell that it was impossible to obtain it—that Nelson did not wish to talk for publication. Which would probably be the literal truth so far as she was concerned, for, after the way he'd treated her in the hospital, it was unlikely that he'd care to give her the information Cas had sent her to get.

But just to see him! Marcia recalled the night Nelson had sailed on the *Europa*! How she'd longed for him to come into the ballroom and to behold her in her lovely sea-foam evening gown! To dance with her, too.

And she recalled the disappointment she'd felt when he failed to appear; and her agony when she'd seen him shortly afterward out on deck beside his fiancée whose arms were then around his neck!

Now she was on another ship with him, on the *Carlsholm*. Here, concealed behind a crowd of newspapermen, in sound of Nelson's voice, but unable to see him or be seen by him! What a situation! Thrilling in one sense—and maddening in another!

But the patience, intelligence and directness with which he was answering those volleys of questions that were being hurled at him with characteristic journalistic speed and insistence!

Why, at this rate, all the metropolitan papers except the *Courier* would be carrying in their next editions front-page interviews with the architect.

And seeing those stories, what would Cas think and say, if she went back to the city room with nothing? Still, she did not want to make herself conspicuous now by breaking through that group of reporters! No, that she simply could not do. Yet time was passing and her last chance would soon be gone. If only Pat had been in New York to attend to his marine reporting!

Standing there, deploring her predicament, trying to convince herself that she wasn't naturally a coward, Marcia felt some one grab hold of her arm and, looking up, she saw Guy Watson, reporter for the *News*,

a good friend of Pat Sartwell's whom she'd known quite a long time.

"Well, I'll be darned," exclaimed Guy, "if here isn't our little friend Marcia! What are you hanging back for, though, kid? You're evidently here for the same purpose as the rest of us, so why don't you come forward and speak up?" And gallantly surrendering his position, a very advantageous one, Guy whispered:

"Edge in your own questions. Get going with your interview." Then aloud: "I'm sure our celebrated architect, even if the rest of us have talked him almost deaf and dumb, will be glad to answer anything you may wish him to answer. Mr. Trawick, this is Marcia Reynolds, girl reporter for the *New York Courier*."

Marcia, cheeks pale and lips trembling, stood silent while Nelson fixed his gaze upon her. She felt so unstrung, so all-gone, she was actually afraid of falling—of fainting dead away in front of this man she loved. But she kept on her feet, somehow, as he, ignoring everybody else, leaped from his steamer chair and all but shouted:

"You—you're a newspaper reporter, and in New York! Why, I thought you were married and had gone to Mexico City."

"Not married yet, but soon. Eh, what, Marcia?" put in Guy with a knowing smile, for Pat had done

more than enough boasting in Newspaper Row about his engagement.

Marcia, whose faintness was instantly routed by Nelson's exclamation, spurred on by a feminine pride only a little less great than her love for him, looked straight into his eyes and said:

"Yes, I *am* a newspaper reporter, and I *am* in New York, as you see. And Guy Watson is right, I'm not married yet, but I shall be very soon—next week, to be exact. Now, Mr. Trawick," she continued, endeavoring not to appear self-conscious, "may I, please, ask you a few questions? I should like most to have you tell me how the Russian women are faring under the Societ régime. Are they better or worse off than they were under former governments?"

"They are much better off, but"—impulsively—"just a moment, if you'll kindly sit down here in this chair I'll finish up with these gentlemen of the press. I think"—in an aside to Marcia who'd slid into the chair—"I must have just about finished with them as it is. However"—turning back to the reporters—"if there *are* any further questions?"

There were quite a few further questions, all speedily answered. Then the journalists went about other business—that of interviewing other celebrities aboard the *Carlsholm*.

"Now," began Nelson, flinging himself into a chair beside Marcia's, "that we're alone at last, it's your

turn and I can answer your inquiries much more satisfactorily than I could have done with that crowd of reporters all around us."

The charm of the man, his smile, his looks, his voice, his manner! Small wonder he'd been irresistible that momentous day of the Fourteenth Street accident! And smaller wonder still that, close as she was to him now, he was even more irresistible. Such love as her love for him could come only once. Just once in a lifetime. Of that Marcia was more certain than ever.

What was it he wanted to know about her, though? However, before she could ask him, to her unspeakable astonishment, Louise Stovall appeared on deck, in front of her and Nelson. Where the girl had come from Marcia hadn't any idea. Yet there she was, quite gorgeous in a wine-colored ensemble, and with a look in her eyes that showed *she'd* suffered a mighty shock, too.

Louise, terribly flustered and in a state not far from panic, managed an embarrassed, "How do you do?" at which Nelson, again politely rising, said:

"Why, do you two girls know each other? What a surprise! Where did you meet?"

More and more confused, but determined, nevertheless, to answer before Marcia, Louise replied:

"We—er—er—we sat in booths next to each other in a shoe-repair shop sometime ago and—and just got

to talking to each other. Yes, we struck up an acquaintance as informally as that, didn't we, Miss——"

"Marcia Reynolds," supplied Marcia.

"Well, that certainly was an informal way of meeting, wasn't it?" remarked Nelson as Louise took possession of the chair he'd just vacated.

Then, dragging up another chair, one in which he sat facing Marcia, he said: "Are you ready to bombard me with questions? Go just as far as you like. What is it you want to know about Russia?"

She told him and the interview proceeded, with Louise looking more and more disagreeable and uncomfortable all the time.

Finally, when she'd asked all the questions that occurred to her, Marcia thanked Nelson for his kindness, folded together the loose sheets of paper on which she'd been noting his answers, tucked them into her purse and stood up to go.

He stood up, too, towering above her and smiling down graciously at her. "But isn't there something else you'd like to inquire about?"

Something else! Nothing else about Russia, no. If she could only know, however, what it was that had made him "adore" Louise Stovall so!

True, Louise was fairly pretty and very expensively dressed. But it was hardly possible that mere prettiness and beautiful clothes would captivate a man

of Nelson Trawick's personality, caliber and fame. But there were men, some very brilliant and gifted, who seemed to prefer girls superficial and ambitionless; maybe Nelson was of that type.

Yet why was he being overcordial to Marcia, so unnecessarily generous with his time? Was it because he was having an attack of conscience for having deceived her while she was lying injured in the hospital?

"When will I have the pleasure of reading your interview?" he queried. "I'll be very much interested to see what you make of all the data I've given you on Russia. Different writers have different ways of developing and presenting stories, haven't they?"

"Naturally, and I hope you won't be disappointed in this one. It will appear in the late afternoon edition of the *Courier*." Marcia avoided his eyes because she was afraid tears would gush into her own any second. "And now I'll—I'll have to hurry aboard the revenue cutter which will be going back to the Battery shortly."

"Oh, you're going back on a revenue cutter?"

"The same one I came down on."

"I see. Then it *will* have to be good-by." And taking hold of her hand: "I—I wish you every possible happiness in your marriage."

If he could only have known the circumstances that had led to her engagement and those other circum-

stances that had driven her to consent to a speeded-up marriage!

Nelson released her hand, which Marcia thought he'd surely clasped in a more than merely polite and formal manner. Wasn't that sheer fancy on her part, however, for why would he have pressed it affectionately or held it unduly long? Yet the rapture of feeling his hand upon hers, how it had set her pulses thrilling!

What a lovesick, sentimentalist she was to let herself be thrilled, with his fiancée sitting there, a silent, frowning witness, straining tensely, disapprovingly forward in her steamer chair! What a poor little helpless fool she was!

"Again thank you," Marcia murmured, not knowing what else to say, and walked off toward the prow of the ship.

Nelson, still standing, watched her till her dainty, graceful, brown-clad figure was no longer visible. So she *was* Marcia Reynolds, after all, just as she'd said, and she wasn't married—yet! Of all the incredible discoveries!

Lost in his reflections, Nelson forgot about Louise till he heard her grumbling.

"Thank Heaven, those chattering reporters have gone at last! Maybe we can have a little peace now. You know, Nelse, they bored me frightfully, the whole bally lot of them." Louise still used her

acquired London accent and her favorite English expressions on occasion—when she didn't forget and was her natural American self.

"Yes"—grumbling on—"their silly old questions about Russia bored me, so I took refuge inside the ship and amused myself by putting on fresh make-up and smoking cigarettes. Then, lo and behold, coming back on deck what did I find? The men reporters gone and that—that Marcia Reynolds out here with you alone! And she was more than one too many, wasn't she, after you'd gotten rid of the other bores."

"No, no," Nelson denied, "M——" He almost said "Marcia," but changed to: "Miss Reynolds wasn't one too many. I enjoyed answering her questions. They were so intelligently put, and as for the others, I found them a nice lot of fellows. Bright and interesting, too. Anything *but* bores. I like reporters——"

"Well, I don't. I think they are perfect nuisances, just as big nuisances as customs inspectors, and I was positively furious with that drove of interviewers here this morning. What a lot of nerve they had to come aboard ship, monopolize you, to take you completely away from me! And after all the trouble I'd gone to!"

"The trouble you'd gone to?" Nelson raised his eyebrows questioningly. "You mean——"

"I mean that first I cabled the *Carlsholm* for a

cabin. Then I almost broke my neck to catch the train for Providence yesterday just so I could board the ship and return to New York with you. And why? For two reasons. Impatient, simply dying to see you, I didn't want to wait for the *Carlsholm* to dock in New York. Secondly, I was counting on spending every possible moment with you alone, you know, till we debarked.

"And"—petulantly—"what happened to my nice, carefully laid plan? The very moment we reached Quarantine that crowd of reporters had to clamber aboard ship and take possession of you. Now I ask you, wasn't that mean and selfish of them?"

"From your point of view I suppose it was," Nelson conceded. "Still, they didn't know you were with me when they clambered aboard. But even if they had, they would probably have been forced to come anyhow, assuming their bosses sent them, for orders are orders, aren't they?"

"Oh, I guess they are," shrugging, "and"—toying with a button on Nelson's coat sleeve—"to show you how good-natured I am, I won't complain any more. I have you all to myself again now, haven't I?"

"Yes, we're alone," Nelson replied, thinking of Marcia, of his discovery that she was unmarried and also that she was a newspaper reporter. What a surprise to learn she was a writer! As a shabbily-dressed girl, even as an injured, apparently helpless and im-

poverished hospital patient, she had charmed, bewitched him. But this morning, in her stylish and becoming sports suit——”

“Nelse,” Louise broke in again on his meditation, “while I think of it, darling, do you suppose you can find a duplicate, an exact duplicate of the gorgeous engagement ring you gave me? I miss it so and I’ll never be happy till I have another precisely like it. Try to get me one to-day, won’t you, please, sweetheart?”

Glancing up and down at the promenaders, Nelson replied: “I don’t know about duplicating the ring, Louise. That might be very difficult—impossible, even, unless I had one made to order. Tell me more about the robbery, though, the disappearance of this diamond along with other pieces of your jewelry. You’d just started to tell me of it when the newspaper reporters came along and stopped you, remember?”

“That’s right, isn’t it? But at that, there wasn’t any more to tell, really. Some horrible thief just stole the jewelry. That’s all I know, all I can say.”

“And you have no idea who he was. No possible clues that might lead to recovery of the jewels?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m convinced, however, that one of our servants took them from my jewel case, but I haven’t any idea which one and, since I have no reason to suspect any particular person, since I’m

wholly without clues, there's nothing for me to do, is there?"

"I wouldn't say that. You could turn the case over to a detective. It's amazing to me that your father hasn't already done so, for he surely knows about the theft, doesn't he?"

"No, no, he doesn't. "I——" hesitating briefly, "I didn't tell him. Nor would I let Gertie tell him. You see, father has had all he could possibly bear up under lately. More in fact, for you've no idea what the crashing of his business has done to him. Foreseeing the failure and with no way to stave it off, he almost lost his mind—you'd hardly know him, he's changed so. That's why I decided not to load my troubles on him. The poor, unfortunate old de-ah!"

"Did you ever see anything, though, like the calamities that have befallen my family. The collapse of Stovall & Company, Gertie's illness, and the loss of my jewels! Isn't it all too tragic?"

"Adversities do seem to have descended on you in a heap," agreed Nelson who'd been standing ever since Marcia had left the ship. "I certainly am sorry, too, Louise, awfully sorry."

"I was sure you would be, Nelse, and from all this you can see why I absolutely had to go to Providence; why I couldn't wait till you got to New York to pour my distresses into your ears. I had to have your sympathy. That and your love are worth more to

me than everything else in the world. All of which goes without saying, though, doesn't it, dearest, for you realize what you mean to me, don't you?"

Noticing a far-away look in his eyes, Louise spared him the necessity of answering her query—not through consideration for him but for reasons of her own. She again twisted his coat-sleeve button and said:

"Come, sit down beside your little sweetheart who appreciates and worships you beyond all telling. Beside the girl who day after to-morrow is going to promise to love, honor and *even* to obey you always."

Nelson deliberated a moment, then stretched himself out in the steamer chair he'd surrendered to Marcia. It was a tough break, he thought, to discover *now* that she was free, single; that she wasn't Medella Rolston, as he'd supposed, and married to the Mexican, Carlos Esperino! If only he could have known that before, how differently things might've turned out! What happiness might have been his!

Yet, gazing out over the ocean as anchors were lifted and the *Carlsholm* began pushing on into the city, even had he persuaded Louise to release him from his marriage promise, would Marcia really have consented to be his wife? Hadn't she fled from the hospital after protesting her love for him; after he'd written he would rush there from the Pennsylvania Station to see her?

Certainly, she'd acted strangely, contradictorily, and very, very mysteriously. No denying that. But, through it all, he'd idolized her and longed for her with a longing he had no words to describe.

And now, after months and months of trying to reconcile himself to the thought of never seeing her any more, she'd searched him out aboard ship and interviewed him. Sought him out only to leave him again—with that longing in his heart intensified, if such a thing were possible. Next week *she* would be married, too. Really and truly married. She'd said so herself. But before then *he* would be married. Hadn't Louise just reminded him that their wedding was to take place day after to-morrow?

"Snap out of it, Nelson!" Louise's tone was commanding, though her eyes were smiling. "What *are* you sitting there glooming about? I've been watching and watching you and patiently waiting for you to say something. Now"—tapping him none too gently on the shoulder—"my patience is exhausted and that's what you get for not talking."

"I beg your pardon. I guess I was being very selfishly silent."

"You certainly were, but because I'm so wild about you, and because you're such a perfectly darling old thing, I pardon you. And now let me tell you something else. Something wonderful, glorious. Day

after to-morrow will be the day of days in my life, and all because you are going to be my husband."

The day of days in Louise's life! But what about him? What would that day be in his life? One to be dreaded, regretted, deplored! If only Marcia Reynolds hadn't come aboard the *Carlsholm*! If he just hadn't seen her again—if they hadn't come within caressing distance of each other—how much easier it would be to fulfill his promise to Louise! How much easier!

CHAPTER XIX

NELSON TRAWICK INTERRUPTS

MARCIA, trudging back, through the door of the *Courier's* city room, into that great roar of typewriters and clicking telegraph instruments, heard Cas call her name.

"Come over here a second, before you settle down to work, will you?" he requested. And as she stood before his long editorial desk sprawled out in the center of the enormous room, he eyed her through his spectacles and said: "Well, did you bring back the front-page story I sent you to get?"

That she had the information for a front-page story there wasn't the remotest doubt. But there was very considerable doubt in Marcia's mind as to whether she'd ever be able to write it up. Her talk with Nelson Trawick, his graciousness, his overeagerness to answer all her questions, Louise's startling appearance on the *Carlsholm* had all conjured memories at once so pleasant and so disturbing that she wondered if she could compose herself sufficiently to write one single line.

"There you stand wool-gathering again, the second

time in one day, Marcia," reproved Cas. "What in the world *has* happened to you? Are you ill or are you so much in love with Pat Sartwell, too busy thinking about marrying him to attend to business? Now, don't tell me you fell down on the job; that you came back here without the story I was counting on; that I've already reserved front-page space for."

"No, I didn't come back without it," Marcia answered. "I got the interview all right. A very good one."

"Fine! I knew I could depend on my smart girl reporter to bring back the goods. Now, knock the story out for me like a nice kid. Run in all the punch lines you can. I want something that'll hit the readers right between the eyes—something sensational. And step on it, Marcia, won't you? I'm waiting to rush your copy down to the composing room."

"I'll get it out as fast as I can," she promised. "As fast as I possibly can."

But how fast was that going to be? In all her newspaper career Marcia had never sat down at her desk in such fear and trembling. For what if she botched the interview? Nelson had asked in which edition the story would appear, so he must certainly mean to read it. And supposing, because of her own sorry treatment, the interview should turn out to be just a lot of dull, flat, unreadable printed matter, what galling humiliation that would be to her!

Wasn't it absurd, though, to bother about Nelson Trawick's opinion of her—of her writing—on almost the eve of his wedding? If he *had* been polite and obliging to her, hadn't he also been nice to the men reporters? He was too much of a gentleman, instinctively, too well-bred, too urbane to be other than polished and agreeable. And by this time, in Louise's company, talking with her about their present and their future, he'd probably ceased to give her, only a girl reporter from the *Courier*, even a fleeting thought.

Tears blinded Marcia's eyes as she reached for her notes and stuck a sheet of paper into the typewriter.

Of course those surmises were all wrong. For if seeing Nelson again had shaken Marcia to the very depths of her being, his discovery of her so suddenly in that crowd of newspapermen had stirred him no less profoundly. And not only that, but their meeting had also set his thoughts traveling backward, too, to the never-to-be-forgotten day of the accident. That day of Louise's return from England!

How precipitately Mrs. Stovall had entered that Sixteenth Street Hospital room and how determined she'd been to have him get to the pier in time to welcome her daughter back home!

With more than a little resentment Nelson recalled the mother's obtrusiveness and insistence. Yet, hadn't

she, as the mother of his fiancée, a perfect right to do as she had done, for wasn't it his duty to be at the pier to greet the girl to whom he was engaged?

But what a difference between Marcia and Louise—the difference being all in Marcia's favor, even if she had fled from the hospital after his hurried trip from Washington just to see her! That recollection induced another, a memory of the worn black purse he'd locked away in his desk. The pocketbook with the Medella Rolston card, the onyx-and-diamond cigarette case and the solitary nickel in it.

Those things must now be returned to Marcia and returning them would afford him a chance to see her; would offer a pretext for seeking her out while they were both still single.

But where to find her? At the *Courier*, naturally. He had no other address. And the sooner he had a talk with her, the sooner he would hear from her own lips the explanation of her sudden departure from the hospital and of the presence of that misleading Medella Rolston card that had happened to be in the shabby black purse.

No matter if they were doomed to go their separate ways in the future, Nelson longed to clear up these mysteries without a moment's delay. The very minute he could get away from Louise, he'd make a flying trip to his hotel suite for the pocketbook, then another

flying trip to the *Courier* building. And wouldn't Marcia be surprised to see him?

But getting away from Louise turned out to be no easy matter, for as Nelson attempted to leave her at the entrance of her Washington Square home she caught him by the hand and said:

"Why, Nelse, you certainly wouldn't run off like this, would you? What *does* possess you? Imagine after being in Russia all these months not even coming in to—to kiss me and to say at least hello to my poor sick mother! Gertie would never forgive you if you neglected her like that. Neither would I."

Feeling a twinge of guilt, Nelson, whose impatience to see Marcia had caused him to forget Mrs. Stovall's illness, replied:

"You're right, Louise. I should, and will, stay long enough to speak to your mother; to find out how she is. You told me, though, that she was under the care of a nurse, so don't you think you'd better find out first if it's all right for me to go upstairs to see her? I wouldn't want to excite or shock a person who's sick enough to require the services of a trained nurse."

"You *do* think of everything, don't you, darling? You're *so* considerate. "But"—handing him her key—"open the door and come inside where I can show you how much I love you."

In the reception room, Louise threw her arms about his neck and kissed him. "And now"—pointing to the drawing-room—"go in there and make yourself at home."

Nelson moved to the drawing-room as Louise scurried toward the wide, old-fashioned stairway just opposite. But before he could turn the doorknob the butler, bobbing up from somewhere, whispered into his ear:

"Not in there, sir, if you please. The drawing-room's occupied. Would you mind waiting in the library?"

"Not at all, Judson. It's all the same to me." And he followed the butler down the hall, entering the library which, as it happened, adjoined the drawing-room.

However, instead of sitting down and making himself at home, as Louise had invited, Nelson began walking about in first one direction, then another.

How *could* he go through with this wedding only two days distant? Conscience kept telling him that it was his duty, his inescapable duty to go through with it. He'd given his word to Louise, who'd made all preparations for the marriage. Such elaborate preparations, too!

But those kisses of hers, the unwelcomeness of them, for all the while he was submitting to them he was thinking of Marcia—and yearning for her with

that yearning there were no words to describe! Lovely, fascinating, irresistible Marcia!

Why didn't Louise come back downstairs, and tell him whether or not the nurse felt he should go upstairs to see her mother? How much longer would he have to remain in the Stovall home? If he could only leave! If he could just be on his way, with the old black purse, to the *Courier* building!

In his fretting, his increasing restlessness, Nelson, hardly aware of what he was doing, stopped abruptly, leaned back against the folding doors separating drawing-room from library and regarded from that distance a life-size portrait of Harvey Stovall, which hung on the opposite wall.

"He's been exceedingly kind to me, that man," he mused. "He voluntarily advanced funds for the completion of my college course and even if I did pay him back with interest, a debt of gratitude can never really be paid off except by lifelong gratitude. "Yet"—his eyebrows puckering together—"if I hadn't incurred that debt, I'm sure I would never have met and become entangled with Louise."

Nelson was jerked from his meditation by the sound of a voice beyond the folding doors, in the drawing-room, evidently. It was Harvey Stovall's voice and he was exclaiming:

"I will not do it! What do you think I am, Jim Frazier, a fool?"

Jim Frazier! Nelson recalled that during his father's brief business partnership with Harvey Stovall, Frazier had been head bookkeeper for their brokerage concern. More recently, however, he'd been elevated to membership in the firm.

So Harvey Stovall and Jim Frazier were the persons occupying the drawing-room when the butler had conducted him into the adjoining library.

But now Frazier was talking and he was furious. Nelson could tell that from his tone as he countered:

"I'll *know* you're a fool, Harvey Stovall, if you don't give me half of the fifty thousand dollars you salvaged from Stovall & Company. I've got it coming to me."

"I won't give you a red cent," came the instant retort. "And the sooner you get that through your thick head the better. This fifty thousand is all I have left, and what is fifty thousand nowadays? Why, my daughter's fancy Fifth Avenue wedding will cost nearly twenty thous——"

"I should worry about that!" Frazier was fairly shouting now. "Besides I have a feeling—provided you persist in your refusal to give me this split—that there won't be any wedding. You idiot, do you believe Nelson Trawick would marry your daughter if he knew what an out-and-out criminal you are; if he knew you'd fleeced his father out of two hundred thousand dollars, practically every nickel he had in the

world after his fortune had begun to dwindle through depreciations of his real-estate holdings?"

Could it be possible that Jim Frazier was telling the truth; that Louise's father had actually robbed his dad, deliberately reduced the whole Trawick family to comparative poverty? A poverty which he'd always been convinced had hastened the deaths of his proud parents.

Frazier was still talking. "Continue to hold out on me," he threatened, "and I'll put young Trawick wise. He's due back on the *Carlsholm* this morning. So I'll just go to him and spill the whole rotten truth about you. I'll tell him how you, with your get-rich-quick promises, persuaded his father, who'd never had a day's business experience in his life and who knew no more about it than a new-born babe, to enter into a brokerage partnership with you."

"You're only throwing a bluff, Jim Frazier, I know you," Stovall hissed.

"You mean you *think* you know me," Frazier corrected. "Well"—sarcastically—"I'm not here to exchange compliments. I'm here to get what I came for. And are you going to ante up—or aren't you?"

"I am not."

"Then be prepared to take the consequences, for as sure as we're sitting in this room together, Harvey Stovall, before sundown, Nelson Trawick will know the sort of father-in-law he's about to acquire when

I finish telling him what you did, not only to his father, but also to him."

Nelson snatched a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped cold sweat from his forehead as Frazier went on:

"First I'll inform Trawick that you and your social-climbing wife schemed to entice the highbrow senior Trawick into a business relationship with you. And why? Because, primarily, you figured that as your business partner, you could force him and his wife to take you and your wife up—and push you up—socially. Remember how you boasted to me that the exclusive Trawicks were going to make it possible for you to crash into their snobbish circle?"

There was no answer to that query, and Jim Frazier continued: "But when the haughty lady and gentleman just snubbed you instead of receiving you in their home and introducing you to their friends, what did you do? You turned right around and gypped your partner out of a round two hundred thousand dollars by charging all the losses on that Arizona copper mine deal to Trawick and all the profits to yourself."

"And to you"—Nelson, again mopping his brow, heard Stovall say. "You got your share of the profits on that copper transaction."

"I didn't get what *I* considered my share——" began Frazier.

"Well, you got what *I* considered your share. Yes, I've always paid you well for your services. That's why I resent your coming to my home and demanding money from me now. And you can't intimidate me by threatening to go to Nelson. You wouldn't dare do that, you bluffer! The boy could prosecute you for making those false entries on the books in that Arizona copper deal. He could have you sent up the river."

"And what about you?" Frazier shot back. "They say misery loves company, even in Sing Sing. But I'm tired of all this arguing, and I'm giving you your last chance to cough up. If you don't take it, I'll go straight as a die to Nelson Trawick."

Nelson, never so astounded and never so outraged in his life, attempted to force apart the folding doors. But locked tight, they resisted his efforts. So, remembering that other entrance into the drawing-room, he tore out of the library, thrust open the hall door—and stood facing Frazier who was sitting near a window.

CHAPTER XX

CONSPIRATORS EXPOSED!

HARVEY STOVALL and Jim Frazier both looked up in surprise at this unexpected interruption to their stormy scene. The last person they had expected—or desired to see—was Nelson Trawick.

“You needn’t come to me,” Nelson said to Frazier, “for I am here. Moreover, through the folding doors, I heard your conversation; I heard all your accusations against Harvey Stovall.”

“He’s just sore, son.” Harvey Stovall had bounded from his chair and was throwing his arm about Nelson’s shoulder. “Sore because I won’t give him any money. Don’t pay any attention to him, Nelse. He’s a bum. Not worth listening to.”

In disgust and with a mighty fling Nelson pushed off the conciliating arm and in a tone of utter contempt, said:

“Don’t ever call me ‘son’ again.” The broker stepped back, involuntarily, as Nelson continued scathingly: “Whatever Jim Frazier is, I noticed you let all his accusations go undenied. I also noticed that

most of your answers were equivalent to admissions of guilt. So I haven't the slightest doubt of the truth of his statements."

"But"—looking toward Frazier—"you informed me, without realizing it, of this man's crime against my father. You further said he'd committed some crime against me. What was that, if you'll now be so—so accommodating as to tell me?"

Frazier arose and with a triumphantly vengeful stare at Harvey Stovall, approached Nelson and began:

"Nothing could give me greater pleasure. You remember, of course, that some months ago your car struck down a young girl in Fourteenth Street. You also remember taking her to the Sixteenth Street Hospital."

"Very well," Nelson confessed, "but I don't see——"

"You will, in a minute," Jim Frazier assured him. "Now you wrote this girl a letter from Washington, a quite impassioned love letter which she never received."

"Which she never received?" Nelson felt a distinct shock.

"That's right, and for the reason that it was intercepted by Emma Dalton, the trained nurse who was taking care of the girl. And strangely enough, I

bumped into this same Emma Dalton here this morning on my way in."

"But why did the nurse intercept my letter?"

"She was bribed to do so by Mrs. Harvey Stovall. Yes, they worked hand in hand, those two, and for the sum of five thousand dollars which I afterward paid to the Dalton woman, on the order of Stovall, she rushed her patient out of the hospital before your return from Washington."

"Before *my* return from Washington? This is all beyond my comprehension!" exclaimed Nelson.

"No doubt. No doubt. But it'll be as clear as day when I get through explaining. The plot was hatched and perpetrated by the Stovalls, this nurse and myself. At that time"—with a sneer at his erstwhile partner—"I was doing the dirty work for Harvey Stovall, and because of that he was forced to take me into his confidence. So you see I'm in position to know what I'm talking about."

"Go on, go on," urged Nelson as his 'informer' hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Tell me why that sick girl was rushed out of the hospital."

"Because Mrs. Stovall figured she might entice you away from her daughter to whom you were engaged."

"Oh, that does throw new light on the case, doesn't it?" Nelson remarked as Mrs. Stovall's husband, who'd retreated still farther, tugged furiously away at his mustache.

"I'll say it does, but wait till you hear the rest. They didn't stop with that five-thousand-dollar bribe. No, sir, after the nurse sneaked the patient's purse out of her coat pocket and found in the pocketbook a card with Medella Rolston's name on it, I got my orders to locate Medella. The girl, I understand, had given the hospital authorities another name and the discovery of the card seemed to stamp her a masquerader. It also confirmed Gertie Stovall's fear that she was an adventuress, set on ensnaring, even marrying you. Follow me, do you, Mr. Trawick?"

"I do." Nelson shifted his weight from one foot to the other and ran his fingers through his carefully-combed, thick, dark hair, rumpling it up rather badly. "And did you find Medella Rolston?"

"I should say I did. In a Park Avenue penthouse. What's more, after getting her signature to an agreement which required her to skip out of the country and to stay out of it at least a year, I paid her ten thousand dollars. Again on the order of my broker-partner, who furnished the money.

"By the end of twelve months, you see, the Stovalls were sure you'd be safely and securely married to Louise who, as your wife, could edge herself and them into New York's Four Hundred—and how these socially ambitious parents did long to crash into society! But, by the way"—reaching into an inside coat pocket—"I have the Medella Rolston agree-

ment here, if you care to see it. Removed it from the office safe last week, just in case I might need it."

With a flourishing gesture, Jim Frazier handed the document to Nelson. He took it, examined it carefully and then returned the agreement to Frazier who put it back in his pocket.

Then, raging and with fists clinched, Nelson advanced toward Harvey Stovall.

"You low-down, contemptible crook!" he denounced. But at sight of the elderly man's almost white hair, he drew back and said: "If it weren't for your age I'd—I'd——"

"Why, Nelson Trawick, what *do* you mean?" Louise, who'd just come bursting into the room, screamed out the question. "Did you mean that insult for my father? You must have."

"I did," replied Nelson grimly.

"And"—reproachfully—"father has always been such a friend to you! You know as well as I do that father is no crook."

"I know that he *is*," said Nelson firmly.

"It isn't so, is it, daddy?" cried Louise. "Somebody has just been telling lies about you to Nelse." Louise looked accusingly at Frazier, then turned to her father with: "You tell him the truth, daddy. Set Nelse right about whatever he thinks is wrong and he'll apologize to you like a gentleman. I can't bear

to have hard feelings between you two. That would be a terrible situation for all of us, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would be a terrible situation," said Frazier out of turn, and with retaliating dubiousness, "if it should ever come about. You all know the saying, 'there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip,' " he added, training hate-filled eyes on Harvey Stovall, whose nervous pulling at his mustache and whose continuous floor gazing were the only answers to Louise's request that he set Nelson right about his doings.

"Yes"—went on the erstwhile bookkeeper revengefully—"in Nelson Trawick's place I'd certainly think a long time before I'd marry the daughter of the man who'd not only gypped my father out of all his fortune, but who'd also schemed and plotted and conspired against me; who resorted even to bribery to force me to marry his child. I'd think so long, in fact, that I would wind up by calling off my engagement."

"Well"—retorted Louise hotly—"you aren't Nelse, and who cares what you would—or wouldn't—do in his place? The very idea of your saying daddy gypped Nelson's father and that he did anything un—underhand to make Nelse marry me! You have no proof of any of this, none whatever."

"Haven't I?" with a sneer. "That shows how little you know about it, young lady, for I have plenty of

proof. I happen to know all about the conspiracy of four." Then turning to Nelson, he added: "The Stovalls and myself and Emma Dalton, the nurse, I mean, and——"

Frazier stopped for a moment as Mrs. Stovall and Emma Dalton appeared in the doorway.

"Well, here's luck," went on Frazier. "The principals are all present. Now I intend to show Mr. Trawick exactly how, when and where he was victimized. And let's see if anybody dares to make any denials."

"You impossible creature!" said Gertrude Stovall. "As if we hadn't suffered enough misfortune, with my husband's business collapse and my serious illness, you come here and create this shocking scene. Sick as I was, I came downstairs to see what was the matter. And I find you trying to ruin us all and wreck my little girl's future."

She caught hold of Dalton's arm and continued: "There's no telling what will happen to me as a consequence of all this excitement. You've no heart, Jim Frazier. I never met a man so cruel."

Nelson, studying Gertrude Stovall's face which, so far as he could see, showed no sign of illness, said:

"If you are really sick, this is no place for you and I suggest that you return to your room, for I'm sure the excitement has only just begun."

"She's not sick," edged Frazier. "She's just play

acting. She has only given way to an attack of hysteria. I have her husband's word for that."

"What do you mean by that?" encouraged Nelson. "That he actually told you his wife was hysterical?"

"I'll say he did," replied Frazier. "The day before yesterday. You see, that was before he even suspected I'd come here to-day demanding money. We were on quite good terms, and the old gent got very confidential. He informed me his wife had simply let her nerves get the best of her instead of her getting the best of them. And why?"

"Why?" Nelson was all interest.

"Because Stovall & Company was going on the rocks. She's a great money lover, this lady, as great a money worshiper as her unscrupulous husband. Two of a kind, these Stovalls—one as bad as the other."

Gertrude Stovall's rage got the better of her. "Get out of my house!" she ordered.

"I will—when it suits me to go," defied the one-time bookkeeper. "But that won't be until I've had my say—until I've shown Nelson Trawick what a master crook he'll have for a father-in-law if he goes through with this marriage. I'm sure he wants to know. Don't you, Mr. Trawick?"

"Yes," replied Nelson. "Go right ahead, Mr. Frazier, please."

"With pleasure. Well, first, I just want to say

that your father was only one of many who got trimmed by his slick-talking business partner. Yes, young man, Harvey Stovall, in the years I've been with him has bilked plenty of investors out of plenty of money. Now, just to show you, only a few months ago, on a flotation in New York of phony South American bonds, he raked in sucker money by the handfuls—the money of investors who trusted him.”

That was too much for Harvey Stovall, who, suddenly recovering the use of his tongue, thundered out: “Shut up, will you? What have those South American bonds to do with Nelse?”

“Nothing,” Jim Frazier readily admitted. “I only wanted to show the gentleman that Stovall & Company was one corporation that really deserved to fail; that you, as its president, deserved to lose your fortune so dishonestly made; that you got only what was coming to you.”

“You’re a fine one to moralize,” interrupted Gertrude Stovall. “If there’s anybody in this whole city any more corrupt than you are, I’d like to see him. Yet you have the audacity to stand here and criticize us, to say that my husband got only what was coming to him. If you’d gotten what was coming to you——”

“If I *had* gotten my half of the fifty thousand dollars your husband salvaged from the company,

which he refused to give me and which most assuredly *was* coming to me," cut in Frazier, "I wouldn't have spilled to Nelson Trawick all the facts about your conspiracy against him.

"I gave Harvey Stovall every opportunity to come across. I even threatened—if he persisted in holding out on me—to put his prospective son-in-law wise to the plot against him. That warning, however, failed to make the tightwad loosen up, so now he has only himself to thank for this exposure.

"But"—looking toward Louise—"I told you I had plenty of proof to back up my claims, didn't I?" The revengeful boaster reached into his coat pocket for the Medella Rolston agreement which he exhibited to her before turning it over to Mrs. Stovall with the confession:

"I showed this to young Trawick a moment ago, while you were upstairs and now"—with exaggerated courtesy and very obvious sarcasm—"that it has served its purpose, wouldn't you like to keep it as a memento, a souvenir of the conspiracy in which you figured so prominently? I beg you *to* keep it always."

Grasping the folded document and then perceiving what it was, Gertrude Stovall dropped the agreement as though it had blistered her fingers.

"You see, Mr. Trawick," went on Frazier, "the effect that paper has on her! And"—as Emma Dalton's starched uniform rustled affrightedly into

the hallway and back up the stairs, "you also see how that other partner in crime is stealing away. She just couldn't stay and take it any longer. She had no defense and knew it. But ducking out—— What a coward!"

"And what a disgrace," exclaimed Nelson, "to a profession which is usually represented by only the highest types of womankind!"

"Isn't it so?" agreed Frazier. "Since I've now had my say; since I've gotten my revenge, even if I failed to get the twenty-five thousand I came after and was more than entitled to, I shall at last bid you all good-by."

There was only one responding good-by, however—Nelson's—as Jim Frazier passed through the door.

An appalling silence followed, which Louise finally broke by a sob and a request to her father and mother to withdraw so that she and Nelson might talk things out together.

"Of course, dear. Of course," and Gertie Stovall's tea gown billowed toward the hall, her husband trailing it by only a step or two.

But in the doorway, Mrs. Stovall turned and said: "Just a moment, Harvey, dear. Before we go I want to tell Nelson—and you'll bear me out in this—that Louise had no part in, that she knew absolutely nothing about what Jim Frazier described as our plot against him. Isn't it true, Harvey?"

A confirming inclination of the head from the broker, and his wife continued: "I further wish to assure you, Nelse, that we resorted to such otherwise unpardonable measures only to save you from yourself and from the clutches of that——"

"Kindly spare me any and all explanations, Mrs. Stovall," Nelson snapped. "Do you see how I could ever again put any credence in anything you or your husband might say? And I was just standing here thinking if the ends of justice were met—well, you know as well as I do what would happen to you and your fellow conspirators."

"You aren't going to prosecute us, are you?" Gertrude Stovall's cry was one of terror. "Surely you wouldn't do that for the sake of the girl you're to marry so soon. You wouldn't want to bring everlasting disgrace on your wife's family!"

"Louise's family will never be *my* family," Nelson retorted decisively.

In a panic lest Nelson should call their wedding off, Louise gestured her parents out into the hall, dragged Nelson across the room, sank upon the sofa and, pulling him down beside her, began:

"Nelse, I understand your feeling perfectly; your resentment against Gertie and daddy, and if you don't want to consider them as your family after—after we're married, I shall never even ask you to. I shan't even ask you to see them. But"—weeping on his

shoulder—"you won't invoke the law against them, will you? That would be terrible on us all, on them and on you, as well as on me."

Nelson, moved to pity by the appeal and the tears, replied: "There, there don't cry, Louise. I promise not to prosecute your parents. Anyhow, all the litigation in the world couldn't undo what's done, could it?"

"You wonderful old darling! How you *have* relieved my anxiety! And"—cuddling up to him—"one more assurance, please. You won't blame me, ever, for what daddy and Gertie have done, will you? You couldn't blame me for the guilt of others, could you?"

"Certainly not." But with visions of Marcia and of the purse he wished to return to her floating through his mind, Nelson took out his watch, saw it was noontime, and added: "Now I must be pushing along."

"After being alone with me such a few minutes!" Louise grumbled. Still, thinking of her father's all-but-vanished fortune, of Nelson's wealth, his social and professional standing, she smiled and said: "I shouldn't be too selfish, too demanding, too unreasonable, should I? So I'll consent to your going now if you'll come back this afternoon for a while. I want to show you my wedding dress and veil."

At her mention of the wedding dress and veil a look of pain, of actual distress registered in Nelson's eyes, as Louise remarked to herself. But appearing

not to notice it, she followed him to the front door and asked: "May I expect you here at four? Or is that too early—or too late? Choose your own hour for returning."

"Four will be as good a time as any. I'll see you then."

But in the meantime, as his chauffeur who'd met him at the pier, was driving him up Fifth Avenue to his hotel, Nelson was musing: "I'll soon see Marcia, that glorious, gorgeous creature!"

CHAPTER XXI

MISUNDERSTANDINGS CLEARED AWAY

ABOVE the din and clatter of the city room, Caswell was calling to Marcia as she sat at her desk on the other side of the room. "Swell stuff, that Nelson Trawick copy!" he said. "I've just marked it for page one and sent it to the composing room."

"Glad you liked the interview, Mr. Caswell," replied Marcia. If he only knew the terrific struggle she'd had to write it; how, except for her indomitable will, it would never in the world have been written!

"Didn't I hear somebody taking my name in vain around here?"

Lifting troubled, sad, even tragic eyes from a basket into which she'd just swept several spoiled sheets of paper, Marcia saw Nelson standing beside her desk.

"That—that was my boss, the city editor," she explained, "but of course, he had no idea you were in easy hearing distance. "And"—breathlessly—"neither had I."

"No wonder! I'll tell you why I descended on you

so unceremoniously, though," he said, smiling. "I wanted to get here in time to take you to lunch."

"In time to take me to lunch?" Nelson Trawick, who was to marry Louise Stovall within forty-eight hours, was inviting her out to lunch. And for what reason?

While Marcia was trying to imagine the answer to that question, a Western Union messenger thrust into her hand a telegram from Pat.

"I hope that isn't bad news," said Nelson, as she tore open the envelope.

"No, on the contrary," reading, "it's good news. The message is from my fiancé, and in it he says he's on his way from Philadelphia to New York and that he will be here at the *Courier* in an hour."

"At the *Courier*, he's coming here, too!"

"Surely, and what could be more natural? He's the paper's star reporter."

"Oh, you're going to marry a newspaper man?"

"Yes, the same one who interviewed you the night you left for Russia. Perhaps you remember him, though. His name is Pat Sartwell."

"I do remember him. Well. I remember the excellent impression he made upon me." Then pensively: "And he, Pat Sartwell, is the fortunate fellow? I should certainly like to tell *him* how very, very fortunate I think he is. And I should like to tell you, Marcia, many, many other things that I can't

possibly tell you here. Will you come with me to the Savarin?"

"I won't have an awful lot of time," with a glance at the telegram. "I simply must be back here in an hour. Pat will be expecting me."

"I'll get you back."

"All right, will you wait for me at the elevator, while I put on my hat and powder my nose?"

"I will—but I beg you not to steal too much of my allotted sixty minutes. Every second is so precious to me."

Marcia wondered at the mystery of this call, of Nelson's manner, of his impatience, and now of his words! His talk about every second being so precious! It was all terribly baffling, yet wonderfully thrill provoking, too!

It was across the luncheon table that Nelson handed Marcia the old worn black purse which had been concealed in his pocket.

"Here's something of yours I've had a long, long time," he said, "something I'd feared I would never be able to return."

Startled, she gasped: "My pocketbook! Why, I thought I lost it, the day of the accident on Fourteenth Street."

"You did. Or rather, it was on the street beside you when I picked you up. So I put the purse into

a pocket of your coat, intending to speak to you about it later. But in all the excitement the matter slipped my mind before I left the hospital with Mrs. Stovall."

"I can quite understand that. But how did the purse ever get back into your hands?"

"You'd never guess in a thousand years. And to answer your question comprehensively I'll have to go into a long-drawn-out explanation, for you and I, Marcia, have been victims of one of the most astounding plots, one of the most vicious conspiracies ever concocted and perpetrated against any two human beings——"

"You and I victims of a plot, a conspiracy, *you* and I!" With that exclamation, Marcia dropped her fork.

Nelson, rescuing it and giving it back to her, said: "Yes, only this morning I learned of this plot and I had to see you at once, to tell you about it."

He launched into a description of the occurrences in the Stovall drawing-room, along with Jim Frazier's revelations, which were now amazing Marcia as much as they had amazed him.

"But," he said regretfully, "if you'd only stayed in the hospital a little bit longer, we would've escaped all those things, for I missed you there by only a minute."

"By only a minute!"

"No more. As I drove up in front of the hospital

in a bright yellow cab, I got a glimpse of Dalton helping you into a black taxi that headed off toward Sixth Avenue. So I ordered my driver to overtake you. An ambulance, however, backed up immediately in front of him and cut off the pursuit. Then I hopped out of my taxi and began running up the avenue like a madman."

He'd run after her on foot! How eager he must have been to overtake her! Had she only known. Marcia's heart leaped with delight and regret at the same time.

"It was no use, though," Nelson went on, "as I realized after covering several blocks, because I was never again able to spot your cab. But standing on the street, it occurred to me that you might have left an address with Dalton especially for me, so back to the hospital I raced. And there I found the nurse, in your room, bent over your bed examining the contents of your purse."

"That woman was prying into my pocketbook?" Marcia had lost interest entirely in the luncheon, tempting as it looked, for all her interest was centered on what Nelson was saying.

"Yes, she was a thorough-going conspirator all right," he resumed, "a spy without a scruple. First, she sneaked the purse out of your coat pocket to see what she could find in it. Then she took very particular pains to show me her finds: your diamond-

and-onyx cigarette case, your handkerchief which she informed me was expensively perfumed, and a card with Medella Rolston's name on it. From that card she'd concluded you were not Marcia Reynolds, but a masquerader, an impostor by the name of Medella Rolston."

In spite of her indignation at these disclosures, Marcia laughingly exclaimed: "Imagine any one ever mistaking me for that little jury-vamp! Still"—suddenly recalling that Nelson had said aboard the *Carlsholm* that even he, had supposed she was Medella Rolston—and was then in Mexico with her husband, she added: "You must've been under the same misapprehension as this spying nurse."

"I was," he confessed, "ashamed and sorry as I am to admit it, but only because in desperation, and as a last resort I went to the Club-For-Girls-Out-Of-Work. Remember you gave me that as a temporary address? And I was informed by the club's matron that you hadn't been registered there, at least, under the name you gave me. So what was I to think?"

"Then shortly afterward when I saw the story in the paper, in your own *Courier*, about Medella Rolston, her marriage and departure for Mexico City with her husband, recalling the card in your purse and, putting two and two together, I also assumed you were the jury-vamp. I further assumed, very naturally, that you were lost to me forever."

"How extraordinary! Yet how perfectly reasonable, considering all the circumstances. My flight from the hospital, the presence of that card in my pocketbook and your failure to find me registered at the Club-For-Girls-Out-Of-Work. But shall I tell you why you didn't find my name on the register and why the Medella Rolston card was in my purse?"

"Please do."

Explaining the "Beggar Maid" series of articles, her promise to the *Courier's* city editor to keep her identity a secret while the "actual experience" material was being gathered and while the articles were being written, Marcia said:

"Keeping my promise, I signed a fictitious name—Agatha Culbertson—on the club's register. And as to the Rolston card, Pat Sartwell, the man I'm to marry, having met the jury-vamp and sized her up as a good subject for a feature story, gave it to me with the suggestion that I interview her.

"Just as a reminder, I dropped the card into my purse and as soon as I could get around to it, when the 'Beggar Maid' series was finished, I went to Medella Rolston's penthouse. In the meantime, I'd been hurt, Emma Dalton had stolen my pocketbook and found the card in it."

"Then it was you who wrote the story I read! You reporters do get into all sorts of places, don't you?"

"Don't we? There's no other profession like ours,

that's sure. While I was in the jury-vamp's living room, though, one of the strangest things in all my newspaper career occurred. A man whose name was Frazier—evidently the same man who enlightened you about the plot against us—blew in and paid Medella ten thousand dollars to get out of the country and stay out of it for a year."

"And the reason he paid her those thousands," Nelson explained, "was because Harvey Stovall, who supplied them, believed Medella Rolston was you. But with all his and his wife's plotting and bribing they succeeded in separating us only temporarily, didn't they, Marcia, my dearest? For here we are together!"

"For this once, this fleeting hour, yes," she replied huskily.

"You don't think this will be the end for us, our last meeting, I hope! *I* certainly have no such idea."

"You *haven't*—when you're to be married tomorrow, and when I'm to be married next week?"

Nelson, stirred by her sorrowful voice and the hopeless look in her eyes, said:

"Marcia, before I answer that I want you to answer a question for me. One on which our whole future may hang—*will* hang, I believe. In the hospital, when you honored me by allowing me to caress you and honored me even more by responding to my caresses, did you really love me, as you declared?"

Did she love him? How strange that query sounded when never, in all the long months since those heavenly moments, had she been able to make herself stop loving and longing for him!

"You were serious, as serious, as sincere with me as I was with you, then?" His voice and look were full of entreaty.

He'd been serious and sincere with her! He, Nelson Trawick, had meant all he said on that unforgettable morning!

"Yes," Marcia whispered.

"You darling! And what about now, do you love me and only me? That may sound presumptuous, in the circumstances, yet—yet I want you to answer without reservation. Don't be afraid; don't be timid, for I love you and only you."

She answered simply and candidly, without reservation, and he said:

"You are probably wondering, aren't you, how, never having loved another girl in all my life, I ever became engaged to Louise Stovall, and how I ever allowed the engagement to stand. Well, I can easily clear that up."

In a few sentences, he explained the affair with Louise, and continued:

"In our position, Marcia, I see only one thing for us to do. You must have a heart-to-heart talk with Pat Sartwell and I must have one with Louise Stovall.

And the sooner the better for all concerned, for I am sure neither your fiancé nor mine would insist upon, or even wish to, hold us to our promises when we feel as we do toward each other. It will be embarrassing, of course, explaining the reasons for such requests. Yet, asking for our release will be a fairer, kinder course to follow—fairer and kinder to every one—than going ahead and entering into loveless marriages. Don't you agree with me, Marcia?"

She most certainly did agree with him. Still, recalling and telling Nelson of Pat's child, of her illness, of his distress about her, she suggested: "First let me find out how the baby is and how Pat is feeling before broaching such a painful subject to him. I wouldn't want to be unnecessarily hasty or cruel."

"Nor would I want you to be. So just see what the situation is, and await the proper moment. But as for me, I already have an appointment with Louise for four this afternoon. That will be the proper moment for our heart-to-heart talk.

"And if you'll make a date with me for to-night, at eight or thereabouts, I feel sure I can come to you with the announcement that I have obtained my release without any sacrifice of honor, and that I am ready and eager to offer you my name and my heart. My heart, though, you've had ever since the day I held you in my arms in the hospital."

To think that she'd had his heart during all those

months and months of missing and misjudging him! But now he was proposing and, miracle of miracles, she'd soon have his name!

Marcia gleefully gave him the evening date along with her address. Then, suddenly remembering the insight she'd had into Louise Stovall's character the day Elting had robbed her of her diamonds, said almost despairingly: "I hope you won't be disappointed; that you will really be able to secure your release."

"Oh, I'm confident I shall be! After I explain things to Louise, make her see them as they are, I am certain she'll give me back my promise, for what would be the good of a legal tie without an accompanying love tie? Before I forget it, and in justice to Louise, she had no part in that conspiracy against us. Knew nothing about it, in fact. Yes, she assured me herself of her innocence."

Louise Stovall innocent! The exclamation almost found its way to Marcia's lips. Innocent of participation in, or knowledge of the conspiracy, perhaps. But how disgracefully guilty otherwise! If Nelson Trawick were only aware of her clandestine visits to Tom Elting's suite, he could break off his engagement in all honor, all justice—without the slightest pleading, without even asking any release!

The Savarin's clock chimed and Nelson, who'd paid no more attention to the dishes in front of him than

had Marcia, nor to the passing of time, exclaimed: "I promised to get you back to the *Courier* in an hour, didn't I? And here we have only fifteen minutes left in which to eat our lunch and make it!

"I'm not hungry," in smiling protest. Who could have had any appetite in the face of all that had happened and of all that was about to happen?

"Even so, eat something. And drink your coffee to please me, won't you? You will have to work this afternoon and I don't want you to go back on the job, altogether lunchless."

To please him she swallowed a few bites and sipped the coffee, he eating and drinking with her.

With true lovers' reluctance they parted at the entrance of the *Courier* building and Marcia sailed into the first ascending elevator—the very one into which Pat Sartwell had preceded her by less than a second.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WHEEL OF LOVE TURNS

REACHING the city-room floor, Pat, whose gray felt hat was pulled way down over his forehead and whose shoulders Marcia noticed, drooping for the very first time, said:

"If you aren't in too big a hurry, come down to the end of the hall with me, will you? There we can talk undisturbed."

"Of course, I'll come." And walking along, she asked very concernedly about Sara.

"She's out of danger, now," Pat replied. "But, oh, Marcia, the suspense during the operation was horrible! She was so gravely ill and the doctor had held out so little hope. And if that baby had died, I could never have forgiven myself, as I told you. Because of remorse, you know. I'd neglected her so shamefully. There's never been a more unworthy father than I. Imagine, coming out from under the anæsthetic, the little thing called for me just as she'd done while taking it. I've never been in such agony."

I had never dreamed any one could suffer the agony I've had to endure."

Standing at the end of the corridor near a window through which a flood of sunlight was pouring in upon Pat's face, Marcia saw how haggard it was. He certainly must have suffered, no doubt of that. His eyes, those laughing eyes, were so sad, weary and bloodshot as to be almost unrecognizable.

"I'm still in torture," he went on, "for Sara's cries continue to haunt me and my conscience continues to stab me. Isn't it amazing that the child kept on loving me when I treated her so indifferently? I've formed one resolution, however, Marcia—one I shall always keep—and that is to do everything possible to make up to the little thing for my inexcusable neglect. She's an angel, a perfect angel."

After moments of saying nothing, of only listening with infinite pity to Pat's regrets and self-reproaches, Marcia began:

"From all you've just said, I have a feeling if you and I weren't engaged, you'd like to—to patch up things with Sara's mother, remarry her, I mean, and spend the rest of your life near her and the baby. My intuition tells me you'd thought of that when remorse was dogging, plaguing you so."

"I had," Pat admitted. "I'd thought of it till it had become almost an obsession. But we *are* engaged

and my heart was so set on marrying you. You're such a grand and glorious creature."

"I think you're rather grand yourself, you know," Marcia complimented. "I believe you'll be even grander, though, and I'm sure you'll be loads and loads happier back with your former wife and your adoring baby, than you'd ever be with me, Pat. For then you'll have the joyful satisfaction of realizing that you're fulfilling a duty that otherwise you'd always be blaming, even hating yourself for having shirked.

"This crisis through which you've just passed has made another man of you. It's taught you, as I can't help seeing, that life is by no means all pleasure, all laughter and just going out after the things we want the most. Yes, Sara's sickness and narrow escape from death have revealed to you a paternal responsibility you never felt before."

"Why, Marcia, how understanding you are! And how kind-hearted. I never expected such understanding, even from you, grand and glorious as you are."

"It isn't kind-heartedness at all," she denied. "I've only tried to put myself in your place and to offer you what seemed to me to be your best chance for contentment. And now that I have done so, let me tell *you* something. Something I'd dreaded to tell you till you gave me this opening. Listen carefully. I'll

have to talk like lightning, for we both should be making the typewriters click."

"Right enough, but do go ahead. I'm all attention."

Talking rapidly, Marcia sketched out at least the high spots of her one great romance, and in so doing she was compelled to go into her reasons for persuading Pat to lay off the story of the Elting robbery.

"Well, I'll be darned!" said Pat. "I always suspected you of having some secret sorrow. Didn't figure Nelson Trawick had anything to do with it, however. Didn't suppose you'd ever so much as spoken to him, and all the time you were as crazy about him as that. Much as I hate to lose you, since it's Trawick you love, you never could have been happy married to me, anyway, I guess, could you?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't, Pat, charming, fine and wonderful as you are. And you never could have been entirely happy married to me, either, haunted by remorse over neglect of your child."

"Before Sara's illness I wouldn't have agreed with you about that. Not at all. Still, as you just remarked, that has made another man out of me and now I do agree with you. So at last—in ways beyond our understanding—it looks as if things are working out right all around, doesn't it?"

Smiling, not broadly, but smiling, they both hurried on into the city room.

But if Marcia and Pat had reached an understanding with gratifying swiftness, no such good luck awaited Nelson. For when he, in the gentlest, kindest manner possible, acquainted Louise with the circumstances and developments that were prompting him to ask her to release him from his promise, she flew into a regular tirade.

Dominated by her rage, she so forgot herself as to cry out:

"I knew Marcia Reynolds was nothing but a snoop-ing reporter. I told her as much that day in the taxi. And now she's gone and made up a pack of lies about me and blabbed them to you just to win you away from me! I should have known better than to trust her—than to have had anything at all to do with her!"

"Than to trust her, to have had anything to do with her! What *have* you had to do with her? As for Marcia, she's said nothing about you. This morning you said, however, that you'd met her informally in a shoe-repair shop. Now you admit having talked to her in a taxi. There's something mysterious here; something *you* will have to explain. So calm down, won't you, please, and tell me the whole truth concerning you and Marcia Reynolds?"

Instead of doing as he requested, Louise only stormed on and on, becoming more and more violent in her denunciations against Marcia and more and

more emphatic in her determination to hold Nelson to his marriage promise.

"I'll never release you, never!" she shouted. "Not even if you beg me till you get blue in the face! Here I was hoping you'd come with a new engagement ring for me. Instead, you come with this appeal for your freedom. Well, I repeat, I won't give it to you. Nor will I allow you to leave this house till you have assured me that our wedding will go through as planned."

Nelson, fires of anger burning in his dark eyes replied: "I cannot force you to give me back my word, of course, to release me from a promise you insist upon holding me to, even though I do not love you and never have. And this you must know as well as I do, for can you name a time when I've ever said I loved you? But one thing is sure and certain, you cannot force me to remain in this house another minute to be further abused and insulted by you.

"Now"—on leaving—"some time when you've gotten control of your temper *and* your tongue, when you're disposed to be reasonable, if you ever are, phone me and I shall come back and talk to you again. Till then, I'll leave you to your reflections upon the way you've acted this afternoon."

Marcia, all frocked out in crinkly cream satin, polished her nails over and over. Not because they

needed polishing, but because she simply had to be doing something.

After her conversation with Pat, as the afternoon wore on into evening, her emotions had destroyed her poise completely. One moment she'd been deliriously happy and the next moment positively panicky with fear. Fear that Nelson, failing to secure a release without sacrificing honor, would go on and marry Louise Stovall, anyway, to preserve his honor. Other men had done that, times without number.

But soon the suspense would be over, for there was a ring at the bell! Trembling from head to foot, Marcia opened the door.

"You beautiful thing!" was Nelson's greeting. Following her into the living room, Nelson laid on a table the last edition of the *Evening Standard*, which he'd had in his hand, seized her in his arms and enraptured her with his caresses.

"I'm so glad, so relieved that you've come. I was afraid, terribly afraid," Marcia confessed. "But tell me quickly, was the outcome of your talk satisfactory?"

"It couldn't have been more *unsatisfactory*."

Nelson's brows knitted most discouragingly and Marcia's heart skipped a beat. To lose him now, for the sake of honor! To lose him——'

Without another word he picked her up and carried her to the sofa, exactly as he'd carried her down the long hospital ramp.

"To lose him now!" That phrase hammered itself into Marcia's mind as she sat and watched him go back to the table and snatch up the newspaper.

Returning to the sofa, Nelson stood and looked at Marcia for a moment, repeating the compliment, "you beautiful thing!"

Then he sat down and spread the paper out in her lap. "Now, to go back to what you asked me. Louise refused absolutely to release me. You never saw such a scene as she staged, either, when I asked her for my freedom. In her blind fury she called me every name she could think of. But although, in parting, I'd suggested that she phone me—if the time ever came when she felt she could be reasonable—I waited for no such summons. No, on my way to you, only a few minutes ago, I returned to her home and released myself. Honorably and fairly."

"You *did*!" Then he must have frowned only because of unpleasant memories.

"I certainly did," pointing to the paper. "Take a look at this and you'll see why. You will also see how, even if I hadn't loved and wanted you more than everything else in the world, marrying Louise would've been utterly impossible."

Marcia held up the newspaper and saw on the front page Louise Stovall's picture, underneath the streamer headline:

TOM ELTING ROBBED NEW YORK GIRL OF DIAMONDS

Reading the story that followed, Marcia discovered that Elting under a barrage of questions by authorities at precinct headquarters, had finally confessed to the jewel robbery.

She further learned that a detective on the police force had gone to the Savoya and gathered from an elevator boy precisely the same information Pat Sartwell had obtained: the facts of Louise's visit to Elting and of her disappearance from the hotel, minus a slipper heel.

With that "lead" as a starter, so the *Standard's* report ran, the detective had searched Elting's apartment, unearthing the same photograph appearing in the paper: one, as it happened, autographed by Louise, "with all her devotion to her dearest, dearest Tom."

"And"—silently concluded Marcia, wise in the ways of newspaper reporters—"the *Standard's* crime reporter was on the job—in the prison, no doubt—just waiting for news at the time the confession was wrung from Elting, and 'scooped' this sensational story which I induced Pat not to write."

Nor could any deduction have been more correct.

"Have you finished reading?" Nelson asked as he saw her eyes fixed abstractedly on a floor lamp.

"Yes," she answered.

"Then you can see why I had a perfect right to break off the engagement, can't you? But to verify the story, without waiting for any summons, as I said, I went back to Louise and asked her if it was true. Seeing the futility of denial, she admitted that it was.

"But what a girl, deceitful, tricky and false, apparently, through and through! Why, on top of everything else she actually had the audacity to tell me she felt sure some servant had stolen the diamonds of which Elting had robbed her. I've never met such a character."

"Nor I."

"But how well did you know her, Marcia? On the ship she claimed to have met you in a shoe-repair place and this afternoon, while raging, she admitted having talked to you in a taxi. She also called you a snooping reporter. Now what's the explanation of all this? I tried to get it from her and couldn't."

Marcia hesitated. But Nelson was insistent. "I'm going to marry you at the very first possible moment, so I advise you to answer that question without delay. Otherwise you will spoil our honeymoon, for I'm giving you fair warning, I'll torment you till you do answer it."

Not wishing to spoil their honeymoon, she gave in, as he clasped her in his arms, and told him the truth about herself and Louise; also, about Pat's suppression of the scoop which the *Standard* had printed only in its last edition of that very day.

"And"—Marcia continued—"since I've started on confidences, I shall answer another question of yours. It dates back to the day you took me to the hospital. But it embarrassed me so terribly at the time! It was your question about why I ran into the middle of Fourteenth Street, right into the path of your speeding limousine."

"Did that question embarrass my darling? Why?"

"Because—because I was chasing a little old gold-carded fortune a parrot had just picked out of a big box of fortunes. A fortune that I dropped and which the wind blew into the street and which, if I remember it, read:

Deep and dark are the secrets of the future,
like the ocean's depths. And this is a fateful
day for you. THE WHEEL OF LOVE WILL TURN.
But you will also encounter peril. Yes, before
nightfall you will find yourself face to face with
both death and romance. BEWARE!

"What do you suppose led me to invest my next-to-last nickel in that 'fortune,' Nelson?" Marcia asked.

"For all I had in that shabby old purse you returned to me was one lone dime."

"Fate, my own little sweetheart. Didn't I tell you in the Sixteenth Street Hospital it had been destined that we should come together? In the very manner in which we did come together, too, I believe. And ~~now~~, after our long separation and our reunion to-day, I can say with even more assurance, that we were also destined to love—and marry. No escaping destiny, Marcia."

"But isn't it great, considering all we've been through, that the wheel of love has at last reversed itself and begun to turn in the right direction? The way it will continue to spin for us from this joyful night on?"

"The way it will continue to spin for us from this joyful night on," repeated Marcia as he thrilled her with his kisses.

THE END

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Roger Rathburn went into the desert country, an outlaw and a gunman.

CHESEA HOUSE NEW COPYRIGHTS

(25) THE SCARLET SCOURGE. By Johnston McCulley

Dozens of persons might have killed Lorenzo Brayton, but Sergeant Sam Haynes had to find the right one.

(26) ANNE AGAINST THE WORLD. By Victor Thorne

In the desire to help her talented brother, Anne went out into the world—and into grave dangers.

(27) ROVIN' REDDEN. By James Roberts

A general mix-up ensued when Joel Landon robbed a bank, and Lem Redden went to jail for it.

(28) THE GOLDEN ISLE. By Roland Ashford Phillips

Concealing jail breakers is not a healthy game at any price.

(29) THE KIDNAPING SYNDICATE.

By Christopher B. Booth

Forger and yegg, the pair embarked on an astounding criminal enterprise.

(30) THE HUSKS OF LIFE. By Mary Douglas

How Jennie Riley learned the lesson of true love.

(31) THE GOLDEN BOWL. By Harrison Conrard

Gold, plenty of it, appears in this story of Arizona.

(32) WHOSE MILLIONS? By Joseph Montague

Jim Woolworth was out to find the missing heir of an English estate worth twenty millions.

(33) THE SPIDER'S DEN. By Johnston McCulley

John Warwick had some thrilling adventures as a member of "The Spider's" unique organization.

(34) HER DESERT LOVER. By Louisa Carter Lee

When Philip Lane took in Beatrice Hale, Fate stalked in at her side.

(35) OBJECT: ADVENTURE. By Ray Courtney

And Kent McGregor found it at the Bar Diamond Ranch.

(36) THE CRATER OF KALA. By Joseph Montague

A vivid story of exploration and danger in the South Seas.

(37) THE DEMON. By Johnston McCulley

When "Big Charlie" Snokes, gang leader, killed Alderman Redson, political boss, things began to happen with startling swiftness.

(38) THE WOMAN IN MAUVE. By Georgette MacMillan

The devotion of a confirmed bachelor to "the one woman" is severely tested.

CHELSEA HOUSE NEW COPYRIGHTS

(39) THE CACTUS KID. By James Roberts

They thought him an outlaw, but much to every one's surprise, he put himself on the side of law and order.

(40) AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY HOURS.

By William Wallace Cook

David Whitley agreed to pilot an airplane around the world, within a week, for \$100,000.

(41) A SEASIDE MYSTERY. By Christopher B. Booth

A tale of mystery and excitement hung upon the loss of Mrs. Hendershott's hand bag at the country club.

(42) A GIRL AGAINST ODDS. By Marcia Montaigne

It was a good start for a love story when Katharine Waite discovered an unconscious man on a country road and had him treated at her home.

(43) THE CAVALIER OF RABBIT BUTTE.

By James Roberts

Outlaws and rustlers were operating in the cattle country when Steve Brent took a hand.

(44) FOOLS OF TREASURE. By W. E. Schutt

Thrilling adventure in a search for treasure on a tiny island off the coast of Africa.

(45) THE EYEWITNESS. By John Paul Seabrooke

Lawyer Colby had a tangle of trouble, doubt, and anguish on his hands as a result of a client's codicil to his will.

(46) HER WEDDING RING. By Marcia Montaigne

Youth called to youth when Tom Storms, a young musician, met Rose Ellison.

(47) TUMBLEBUG RANCH. By Ewart Kinsburn

Life in railroad construction camps in the great stretches of the Southwestern desert region.

(48) WHERE THE TRAIL DIVIDES.

By Roland Ashford Phillips

A Royal Canadian Mounted Police story that will satisfy the most exacting demands for thrilling fiction.

(49) FOUR KNOCKS ON THE DOOR.

By John Paul Seabrooke

A mysterious factor of a series of murders was that all the victims were born on the same day.

(50) THE MAN WHO MARRIED FOR MONEY.

By Victor Thorne

John Grant married a wealthy woman, thinking to console himself for the loss of the one he loved.

(51) THE BLACK SIGNAL.

By David Manning

A great change was wrought in Lew Melody when he met Mary Furnival. A stirring Western romance.

(52) FRASER'S FOLLY.

By W. E. Schutt

A gold-bearing quartz ledge proved a magnet for a sorry crew of scoundrels.

(53) SHADOW HALL.

By John Paul Seabrooke

Rachel Mallory's premonition of evil when she went to Shadow Hall was soon turned to grim reality.

(54) THE LOVE BRIDGE.

By Mary Imlay Taylor

To Duncan Hart, the engineer, his bridge across the mighty canyon was a dream.

(55) THE LUCK OF BLIND GULCH.

By Joseph Montague

Visions of untold wealth came to Jefferson Briggs as a result of an ungrammatical, grimy letter.

(56) OTHER FOLKS' MONEY.

By W. B. M. Ferguson

The possession of other folks' money does not bring peace of mind.

(57) BLACK STAR'S RETURN.

By Johnston McCulley

One never tires of reading about the exploits of Black Star, suave rogue and master villain that he is.

(58) THE GOLDEN TEMPTATION.

By Victor Thorne

Success had come to him in everything—except love.

(59) BLACKIE AND RED.

By David Manning

They hated each other and fought, time and time again; yet they always stuck together.

(60) SOUTH OF FIFTY-THREE.

By Jack Bechdolt

Jonathan Hayes held the secret of an immensely valuable cache of sealskins, and became the object of more than one conspiracy.

(61) THE WOMAN IN 919.

By John Paul Seabrooke

Hers was a dramatic career of intrigue and trickery, and it ended in a tragic manner.

